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「虚惑星の魔法使い」
下巻
星空めてお
イラスト BUNBUN
ファイヤーガール
FIRE GIRL

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Next to him, Homura took a breath and let the tension leave her shoulders, before crossing her arms.

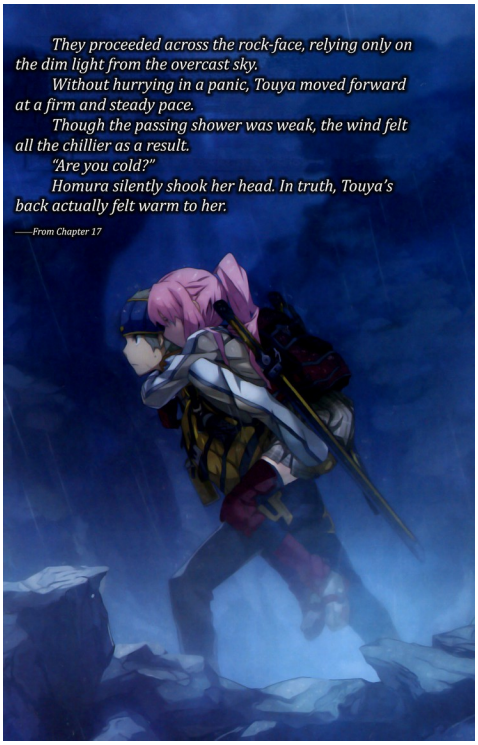
"I see... If this were a TV drama or movie, Touya-kun would be an excellent protagonist. Senpai would be the heroine and I'd play a supporting role."

"What're you talking about? You'd definitely be the protagonist. If this were an absurd gag manga, that is."

"Hey, hey, I was trying to encourage you with the greatest respect in my own way! What's with that attitude!? Just when I try to be nice, this is what I get!"

——From Chapter 18

As she stood to protect Kamikoma behind her, Homura immediately emptied two canisters of tear gas and pulled off the safety pin of her spare canister.
"*cough, cough*."
She coughed and shed tears at the intense stimulus of the spray that filled the air.
Even so, the portion of the tear gas that managed to reach the nostrils of several of the wolves was potent enough to make them lose the will to fight.
—From Chapter 22


They proceeded across the rock-face, relying only on the dim light from the overcast sky.
Without hurrying in a panic, Touya moved forward at a firm and steady pace.
Though the passing shower was weak, the wind felt all the chillier as a result.
"Are you cold?"
Homura silently shook her head. In truth, Touya's back actually felt warm to her.
—From Chapter 17

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Chapter 14

After school, Homura visited the Exploration Club building.

This was her third time entering the club building.

She had promised to learn magic from Professor Fujimori today.

After taking a quick peek into the dimly-lit transport room where the Transport Ring was preciously stored, she climbed the stairs and headed to the stand-by room, where she found a high school girl sitting slovenly on a chair and completely absorbed in playing a handheld game console.

She finally came!

Homura took a circuitous route to stand in front of the girl, who had yet to notice the visitor.

There was no mistake. Homura remembered this exotic-looking face.

"…Ame-chan? Ameno-san?"

"Hah!?"

The girl jumped with a start and looked up to face Homura.

"Who are you!? A burglar!?"

"Wait, wait, aren't you the one who said 'Come in' and let me into the building through the entrance monitor, Ame-chan?"

The girl made an expression of realization.

"Haah, I did that completely unconsciously in the background of my mind."

"So careless."

Homura brought over a chair, and the two of them sat side-by-side at a corner of the table.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Hinooka Homura, a new member of the Exploration Club."

"I'm Fujimori Ameno. I know all about you, Homura. It somehow feels like I've known you since before I was born."

"I-I'm honored, I guess."

Ameno grasped Homura's hands with her own.

She had a strong grip that didn't match her appearance.

"I use the rooms in the club building like this, but I still haven't been recognized as a formal club member, ya know."

"So you're a tomboy[1], huh?"

"—Hah?"

"No, no, anyway, I'm happy to meet you."

"Yes, I've wanted to meet you too for a long time, Homura-san."

"Yeah, yeah! Ame-chan, you're a first-year, right? We're in the same grade, right? Misasagi-senpai is kind and wonderful, of course, but it still makes a big difference having a fellow club member of the same age."

"What about Takumi-san?"

"By Takumi, you mean Touya-kun? That mountain monkey doesn't count. He's a boy, after all."

"But Takumi-san is a splendid male member who shoulders the future of the Exploration Club, you know?"

"Eeh?"

Ameno wore a carefree smile, seeming like a charming young girl in Homura's eyes. Her pronunciation had no accent, and her nationality was hard to pin down. She seemed like she might be Scandinavian, but she also had a Middle Eastern air to her. She seemed to be listed as Japanese on her family register, though.

"Hey, Ame-chan, I haven't seen you around school before. Aren't you a transfer student? Though, admittedly, I didn't get to see you when you appeared during the Shinryoku Festival because I was busy at the time."

"The reason for that is terrible, let me tell you! Apparently, there's a dispute among the school higher-ups over me, and my transfer procedure might not even get approved!"

"What's with that? Is your guardian Fujimori-sensei clashing with the school administration?"

Ameno puffed up her cheeks indignantly.

"Chiayu-san doesn't seem to care as long as the Exploration Club members increase. The ones that are quarreling are my home[2] and the school."

"Ah, I get what you mean, I really do. She really is irresponsible like that, that teacher."

Homura strongly nodded while putting the assortment of pastries she had brought down on the table.

Homura had stayed out of clubs until now, but the one thing she had always idolized about them was the meeting place-type atmosphere in rooms like this.

Ameno looked Homura over with great interest.

"…Ah, that's right! Chiayu-san ordered me to take care of your magic training today, Homura-san!"

"Huh, sensei's not coming herself? Did she get delayed somewhere?"

"Chiayu-san apparently had a sudden and urgent appointment with some old comrades of hers, and she went out after making a reservation at a bar in Honmachi."

"W-What!? That's just going out for drinks! She really is irresponsible. Tomorrow, I'm going to severely—"

"Don't worry, Homura-san. Teaching is my specialty. I'm better at it than Chiayu. I can't use magic myself, though."

"Ah, really? Well, Mori-chan doesn't seem suited towards magic either, I guess—More importantly, will you listen to this, Ame-chan?"

As Ameno was making preparations for the magic training session, she was forcefully pulled back by Homura.

Homura took out a set of lemon tea and Happy Turn[3] rice crackers, and handed a portion of them over to Ameno while munching on the crackers.

"Ah, thanks."

"Yesterday, do you know what Mori-chan said to me at the beginning of the day?"

"?"

Ameno tilted her head curiously while holding both ends of a cracker.

"The first thing she said was, 'Hinooka, are you a virgin?'"

"Hahah. That frankness is just like Chiayu-san."

"She also said that that mountain monkey is also technically a boy, so he might make a mistake during an expedition, and even without that, Nutella's environment makes it easy to get excited."

"I see."

"And then she said that, in case such an event ever comes to pass, it would be better to take countermeasures rather than pointlessly resist, and that she'd even prepare contraceptive tools for me! Can you believe that? There are Nutella-use contraceptive tools with the UNPIEP logo on them!"

"That's reassuring. Crude fakes have apparently been circulating lately."

"That's the point you remark on!? It's not reassuring at all! That's not just a late response; they're completely dodging the issue with that kind of solution! They're not considering it seriously at all! The directors and government officials are turning a blind eye to the whole thing!"

"So, are you a virgin?"

The cracker went flying from Ameno's hands with a smack and fell on the table.

"……"

Homura lay her head down on the table and fell silent.

As the silence continued for a long while, Ameno took off a cracker's plastic wrapping and started skillfully folding it into origami.

"Homura-san, I heard you've had a lot of experience with boys. How nice~. I'm so envious."

"Where'd you hear that from…"

"Ehehe," Ameno laughed embarrassedly.

"Even if you say I have a lot of experience… I haven't had anyone in mind recently… And I haven't had the time for dating either…"

"Our activities outside of Nutella receive public attention, and information always leaks out no matter what we do. Intercourse alone is still treated at the level of something cute, but pregnancy on Nutella, let alone with underage teenagers, is a matter that major blogs and the Exploration Club Watchers won't leave be. There's a limit to what information control can do, after all. It would surely affect the club's continued existence. Isn't that a serious matter?"

A tiny frog made out of wrapping hopped along Ameno's fingers.

Homura grumbled while poking at the cracker that had been left bare on the table.

"I'm more worried about Misasagi-senpai… Even if she's physically much stronger than Touya-kun, what if she gets pulled along by the mood? And there's the possibility of a crime being committed while she's drunk…"

"Would that bother you, Homura-san?"

"…Not… really, but…"

With the Happy Powder having been shaken off the cracker, it was now just a plain old Turn cracker.

Suddenly, Ameno raised her head and stared into empty air.

"Hmm?"

"—Ah, speak of the devil. Too bad, I missed the chance to hear more."

"What?"

"'Yes, come on in. We were waiting for you.'"

Soon after, Touya poked his head into the standby room.

Homura glared reproachfully at Touya while remaining sitting.

"Yo, Hinooka. Ameno, long time no see."

"Yes."

"…Touya-kun, you interrupted our rare and precious girls' talk time."

"You said you were going to do magic training, so I came to learn by observation, as someone who's bad at magic myself. So, what were you chatting about? Where's Fujimori-sensei?"

"I'm substituting for her."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. We're going to properly start soon, okay? I still want to talk more with Homura-san."

"You can just call me Homura, you know?"

"No, I couldn't. Even if we're in the same grade, I'm much younger than everyone else."

"You don't look like it, though… How old are you? Did you skip grades?"

"Chiayu-san discovered[4] me about ten years ago. I established self-consciousness in this body and started proper operation three years ago."

"Hah? Eh? Three years ago? …Three years old!? You're an infant?"

"And, incidentally, I'm also a virgin."

Yeah, that makes sense, right?[5]

Ameno turned towards Touya and made a finger-snapping pose.

"Ah?"

"Yes, yes, it's time to start studying magic!"

Homura brushed aside the puzzled Touya and took out a third seat for him.

Ameno held out a headset that was one size bigger than standard headphones.

"So heavy…"

Homura adjusted it on her head while fretting over how the cord connected to its exclusive power source got tangled with her hair.

"This is a brain waves scanner. Even this thing was made quite light weight in comparison to others, you know? You don't even need to take a contrast media shot beforehand."

"It's different from the testing machine that Kinou-sensei used on me before," Homura remarked.

"Yeah, the simple IE aptitude test-use scanner is distributed throughout middle and high schools all over the country, but this is a special piece of equipment that's never moved outside official Exploration Club premises. It's filled with the latest technology and all kinds of licenses, after all. The simple scanner is also more accurate than it used to be, though."

"Hinooka, you did the IE aptitude test?"

"Yeah, I did."

Homura wore a dejected expression.

"What's wrong?"

"I got a shocking result from it… [52:D]…"

"Hey, that's not much different from me. You got [80:B] in middle school, right? What, did you lose calories or something?"

Homura didn't laugh at Touya's joke.

"[B] means you have an aptitude for magic. [C] stands for outdoor activities or experience with martial arts—right?"

"Basically, yeah. [A] stands for both categories. D means that you only have an IE reaction."

"In other words, I'm just a regular person? My peak has already passed? My bubble popped before I realized it?"

Homura sank down onto the table dejectedly even further.

"Statistically, the peak of one's aptitude value is at around twenty years old. Even though they won't let you join the Exploration Club if you're too young either in this country, humph."

From the way she acted miffed, Ameno also appeared to be dissatisfied with the aptitude value evaluation.

"Well, cheer up. It's just a test. It's pointless if you worry over it so much that it affects your training efforts and how you perform when you're faced with a crucial moment in the field."

Touya pulled up and supported Homura's headset as she raised her head despondently.

"…Sorry. You're right. Then, Ameno-sensei, please go ahead."

"Sensei?"

Seeming happy at the word 'sensei', Ameno crisply straightened her posture.

"Then, please take this."

"A handheld game console? I'm supposed to play with this?"

"You don't need to manipulate it manually. It can wirelessly connect with your headset."

When Homura touched the game console, a very stereotypical battle BGM flowed out from it.

"Ah, sorry. I left it in the middle of my play~"

Ameno pressed a hand to her temple with a hum, and then the still active play in the game was saved and the power reset.

"Huh? Did you just use magic?"

"This is Earth, you know."

The UNPIEP logo appeared on the screen, and the already downloaded training-use software started up.

"First, we'll start from the [concept of magic]… Hmm~~, hah!"

Ameno suddenly clenched her empty hands, and when she reopened them, she held a small disk in each hand. Their front surface was black and their back was white. In other words, they were…

"Othello pieces?"

"Yes."

Homura and Touya picked up the pieces that were offered to each of them. They were called Othello stones.

"How many moves are possible to take that piece? In terms of game rules, that is."

"You mean standing it upright like this or turning it over doesn't count, right?"

Ameno nodded.

Touya stared intently at Homura. Though a bit unsure, Homura answered.

"Two moves, right…? One each for white and black."

"Correct. Now then, please focus on how to turn that piece over next. How many moves are possible to turn over this round piece?"

"Again, two moves. From white to black, and from black to white."

"That's correct, but also incorrect."

"Huh?"

"This Othello piece has no front or back. You can turn it over like this…"

Ameno flipped over the piece on Homura's palm with her fingers.

"…Simply flipping it over like this is one move. With just this, it goes from white to black, or black to white."

"That's obvious, isn't it? Then the correct answer is one move, not two?"

"There's one more," Touya said.

"One more? What is it?"

"Don't do anything. From white to white. From black to black."

"As if you can do that!"

"You actually can. Just leaving things as they are is also one possible choice. With this, you have two moves."

After confirming Homura's astonished nod, Ameno continued.

"Then, next… Hmm~~, hah!"

Next, playing cards appeared in Ameno's hands.

They were both face cards. The Jack of Spades and the Queen of Diamonds.

"Just as you can see, these are playing cards. And even if you turn them upside down like this… the design remains identical. The same goes for the back side."

After saying that, Ameno handed a card to Homura and Touya each.

"Yeah, now that you mention it, that's pretty convenient… So this time we're focusing on how to flip over these cards?"

"That's right. Now then, how many moves can you do?"

After turning over and examining her card for a while, Homura raised her hand.

"Yes, sensei! I know!"

"Go ahead, Homura-san."

"It's four moves. You can turn it upside down. You can flip it over vertically. You can flip it over sideways. And you can do nothing!"

"What do you think, Takumi-san?"

"Hmm… can't you also turn it over diagonally, though?"

"Fufu, that's wrong, Touya-kun. If you try to turn it over diagonally, the card will always end up becoming sideways, right? That's part of the pattern of turning it upside down. So it's a combination of the two."

"Homura-san is correct. There are four possible moves for turning over a card. Takumi-san, you already knew this and just played along, right?"

"No, I'm still unsure of the logic myself… Well, I get that there are four moves. Let's move on."

"Then, I'll move on to the next step—Homura used the word pattern, but this word is actually very important. There's another hidden pattern to turning over this card."

"…Hmm? By pattern, you mean a combination of moves?"

After staring at her card for a while, Homura slapped the table in realization.

"You're talking about turning it over each way in sequence?"

"Yes, that's correct. Homura-san, you've got some good momentum going today. Then, in order to make it easy to understand…"

Ameno took out another card for her own use.

While taking turns flipping it over up, down, sideways and upside down, she wrote a series of numbers on the upper right portion of the card.

"I've written 0, 1, 2 and 3 on it. These represent the four moves. Any sequence used to turn it over such as [0123] or [0312] can be used no matter what state it's in at the time."

"Hmm, I see. Now that you point it out, you're right. Then, this time I'm supposed to write down the different sequences for turning it over, those pattern numbers, right?"

"Yes. However, [0123] and [1230] is basically the same in terms of the sequence in which it's rotated, right? So consider them the same pattern."

"Yeah, yeah. This will be easy."

"Really?"

However, it wasn't actually that easy, and Homura had to get help from Touya in order to come up with every possible pattern.

"All right, I'm going announce my results, okay? Then, with 0 at the start, there are six patterns including [01230], [01320], [02130], [02310], [03120] and [03210]!"

"Well done! Then… how about this?"

Ameno next held out a slightly big die.

"So it's a die next."

The die was slightly abnormal, with numbers written on the top right on each of the six faces.

"Hmm~, from 0… to 23? Every face has four numbers on it, with a total of twenty-four numbers? Could this be…?"

"How many patterns of turning it over are hidden in that die?"

"I don't know!"

"An instant response, huh…"

"I know, though?"

Homura was startled and peeked at Touya's face beside her.

She was grimacing due to the strain of the headset's weight on her neck. In the basic puzzle exercises until now, the headset hadn't served any use, but Homura-san no longer worried over it and seemed to have forgotten about it, so it's fine.

"Eh? Why? There's no way you could know. Don't lie."

"I'm not lying. You just need to calculate. The last exercise with the cards had six patterns with 3x2x1, after all."

As Homura looked at him dubiously, Touya explained.

"There are four numbers at first, right? That means, no matter what number you choose next, there will be three numbers remaining. Then two. And finally one."

"Then, this strange die is the same…?"

Ameno smiled happily.

"I did this lesson on the premise that you both would give up at this point, but… Takumi seems to be a step better at this."

"23 times 22, times 21, times…"

Homura faced her notes and went through the endless multiplication, but once it was obvious that she was starting to make mistakes midway when the number of digits increased, Ameno told her the answer.

"The answer is 25 800 quintillion, 52 010 quadrillion, and so forth… basically, it becomes a huge number with twenty-three digits. It's done with factorial calculation."

"Right, right. That, factoring. Say that beforehand." Ameno smiled wryly.

Strictly speaking, that turns into an even more complicated calculation, but that's another matter.

"Sorry. Then, stopping the preliminary preparation here—"

Its existence having been forgotten, the game console's screen, which had gone into sleep mode, brightened up again.

On the screen appeared a three-dimensional die.

"This is the hexa-model of magic that we use in the Exploration Club."

"Ah… this is…"

It was a die painted in four colors.

Just like the image that had appeared in her mind back then, there were two faces each painted white and blue respectively, and one face each painted red and black respectively.

"Homura-san, you've already experienced ignition magic once, right? I read about it in President Misasagi's journal log."

"She failed at it, though."

"Touya-kun, you couldn't even use the most basic illumination magic either yourself… Wait, uwawah, the die is moving!? Gross!"

"In the series of tutorials until now, the device has been tuning itself to match your brain waves, Homura-san."

"This seems fun! I don't get the reason at all, but it's fun!"

When she thought of the die vigorously turning over vertically, it did exactly that, then she stopped it and made it roll over sideways—

Without her once touching the console's buttons, Homura made the displayed die roll around exactly as she thought.

"Ooh, I see… I can simulate magic with this. I just followed senpai's instructions back then."

"Right."

"No matter how many times I see it, it's so strange."

Ameno smiled happily as if it were her own achievement.

"The Exploration Club invested in making this high-precision brain waves scanner, and it is now finally possible to train in magic on Earth as a result. It's also useful for developing new magic."

"I see."

"There are roughly 120 quadrillion manipulation patterns with this restricted hexa-model. Names are attached to specific patterns."

"I know, like Hi (Hydrogen) and Ox (Oxygen), right? Senpai taught those to me. I see~, so that's how it works. Touya-kun also trained wearing this scanner at first, right?"

"With a tetra-model, yeah."

Ameno winked, and then a regular tetrahedron made of four equilateral triangles attached together appeared next to the die. It was also painted in four colors.

Now that there were two dice displayed on the screen, their movements become wobbly and hard to control for Homura.

However, she immediately got the hang of it and started to separately move the hexa- and tetra-models.

Touya's eyes widened in amazement. Ameno also tilted her head curiously.

"You're good at this."

"You wouldn't think you were ranked D."

"…Eh? This is pretty difficult, you know? It's easy to get them jumbled up."

"Then, what if I do this?"

The dice multiplied to four.

"Muh, like I'll lose to that~."

As Homura absorbed herself in it as if she had been given a new toy, Touya watched her with hope and expectation in his eyes.

"—Hey, can we take a break? This is a good place to stop, right?"

"Ah, you're right."

With a sigh of relief, Homura took off the heavy headset.

Next to her, Ameno leaned back in her chair even more tiredly than Homura.

"Huh, are you okay, Ame-chan?"

"Truthfully, this is the first time I've been so nervous…"

"Ahaha, thanks for the lesson. And, no offense to your hard work here, Ame-chan, but if the school's math classes were like this, they'd be so much easier!"

"This is also a proper field in mathematics, you know?"

"Really?"

"Yes! In the first place, Nutella is a mathematical existence. A great number of Indian scientists who discovered renormalization cosmology—"

Ah, I don't wanna hear, I don't wanna hear, Homura thought as she blocked her ears and ran away from the whole thing.

"By the way, where's senpai?"

"Senpai is a regular club president with the accompanying duties, you know. And even without that, she's quite busy at home as well."

"I see, she really works hard, huh. By busy at home, do you mean with studying? Helping around the house?"

"Apparently, it has something to do with socializing with people, because of her father's work. It's something I don't know much about, though."

"Incidentally, President Misasagi usually uses this restricted icosa-model."

Ameno pointed at the new die that appeared on the console screen, a twenty-sided polyhedron made of twenty equilateral triangles. As expected, it was painted with several different colors, but it looked much more complex compared to the dice that Homura had used until now.

"An icosahedron… for real…?"

"This model specializes in manipulating fluids, you know?"

"Even though I failed massively with just a six-faced model, senpai imagined something so difficult… As expected, it's way different when you're a Mage, huh?"

"Senpai is a Magic Warrior, though," Touya refuted with a wave of his hand.

"So she's a warrior who also uses magic, right?"

"Mages are in a different category. I've never met one myself. I haven't heard of one in the neighboring Hiyoshizaka High's Exploration Club either."

At that point, Touya suddenly stopped stirring in his seat.

"…Huh? What about Koma-senpai? She can use magic, right?"

"Hiyoshizaka High Exploration Club President Kamikoma is registered as being part of the Bard class. For magic, she most likely normally uses… this dodeca-model which specializes in the recreation of music."

"Dodeca-model?"

Next to the icosahedron, a twelve-faced polyhedron made of twelve equilateral pentagons appeared.

Homura couldn't help smiling at the mismatch being the sound of "dodeca" and her image of Kamikoma-senpai.

"I see. So what kind of model do Mages manipulate? I bet high-level Mages must use something like a five hundred-faced polyhedron!"

"There's no such thing as a polyhedron with five hundred faces."

"There isn't?"

"No. The three-dimensional objects known as regular polyhedrons, which have equilateral faces, include tetrahedrons, hexahedrons, dodecahedrons, icosahedrons—and finally octahedrons, so there are five kinds in total."

"Then what do Mages uses?"

"Fufufu… do you want to see?"

"Of course I do. That's normal, right?" Homura turned to Touya for agreement.

"Well, it's true I'd like to know."

"Very well. Then, here we go, hmm~~!"

Ameno once again did a posture for using magic that wasn't magic.

The next instant, just when she seemed to cram her hand into her mouth, there was the grating sound of joints slipping out of place—and she placed an object on the table with a clatter.

"Wow!"

"Guh, *cough, cough, cough*—t-this is it!"

Ameno forcibly puffed up with pride despite the tears in her eyes.

"Way too much! That's really disgusting, you know!"

"*Cough*… But I wanted to surprise you… I was trying to make you respect national robots in my own way…"

"Please don't, I beg you."

The object was a cube that was about as large as a clenched fist. Each face was clearly divided three by three, and each section could be rotated around. In other words—

"It's a Rubik's Cube."

"Like I thought~. Though it's a bit shiny with saliva."

In contrast to Homura, who was smiling jeeringly, Touya couldn't hide his surprise for a different reason.

"Mages… use s-something like this for their incantations!?"

"This is the most common model. A normal human brain responds strongly to right angles, so rather than a polyhedron like a icosahedron which is close to a sphere, this kind of thing is more effective and useful."

" …Mages… are even more monstrous than I imagined."

"Hah? What are you saying, Touya-kun? It's not hard at all. It's the same kind of dice shape. And there are only six colors too."

"S-Stupid, you know that there are no scanners or game consoles on Nutella, right?"

"Muh, that's true… what do I do? Bring this cube with me when I go there?"

"That's also possible, but in that case it would be for studying purposes. When you actually use magic in the field, you won't see a physical object like these models. You have to imagine it in your mind. If not, you can't establish the pattern…"

Homura hadn't really understood the seriousness of the matter well.

She was startled for several seconds, but then she started to grow increasingly pale.

"Are you saying that I have to manipulate a Rubik's Cube without being able to see it?"

Ameno and Touya nodded.

"But I can touch and feel it, right? And take a peek midway through."

"That's no good. It's like the die. You have to do it all in your head from the incantation's beginning to its end—right?"

"Yes. If you're going to call yourself a Mage, that's your starting point."

Homura had timidly reached for the cube, but now pulled her hand back.

"Sorry, I need a longer break! Let's talk about something more simple and trivial! You know, my sister recently got into an accident on her bike, and the person she collided with greatly resembled Yodoya-kun from Radiance Factor—"

"You know, I'm thinking that it makes sense that Hinooka is a Mage. That's the star role among investigators, you know? I think it really suits Hinooka's show-off and greedy personality."

"I will also help to the best of my ability. Come to me at any time."

Homura's protest was completely ignored.

"Ah, geez, you guys! I don't have any redeeming features! I'm not that smart! I'm seriously aiming to be a Mage, because I was told that my initial aptitude was good! And yet, what's with the difficulty level being the highest for it!?"

"Now, now, don't say that. Why don't you try it out a bit in the simulation?"

"Impossible, impossible, impossible!"

"Well, it's true that the Rubik's Cube model is still too soon for you, so we'll continue with the hexa-model die from before. The blind test is a normal part of the training menu, so be at ease."

"…Really? Then, how about I try the only spell I know so far, fire magic…"

Homura once more faced the game console with its display now off.

"Hi (Hydrogen)… Ox (Oxygen)… Ph (Phosphate)… Mg (Magnesium)…"

However, she didn't hear the chime indicating the success of the spell's incantation.

She only got the failure buzzer.

Every time the buzzer rang, the uneasily frowning Ameno's eyes widened suddenly. Her joints creaked and her entire body stiffened.

Touya was startled by that briefly shown inhuman expression on her face.

"……"

"H-Hey, Ameno, are you okay? Your face is scary right now."

Ameno immediately rebooted and regained light in her eyes.

"Hah… Sorry, I made you feel the uncanny valley effect[2], didn't I?"

Shaking her head, Ameno turned back to face Homura, who was desperately trying to make the incantation work.

"Homura-san… What was that just now?"

"What do you mean? It's an incantation, you know?"

Homura responded sullenly as she held out her hands before her in the pose for chanting.

"I don't even know the meaning of the word phosphate…" she grumbled to herself.

The buzzer rang again, making Ameno jerk in her seat. Even Touya became nervous as a result.

"…Are you properly imagining the cube?"

"A four-colored die, right? I'm doing my best, you know."

"How strange…"

"Maybe she isn't concentrating enough?"

Ameno seemed to frequently try adjusting the scanner, but the results were poor.

When, as a test, Ameno disabled blind mode and Homura tried again while the mode was displayed, her incantation was deemed a success and the triumph chime rang out.

"To think you only fail in blind training. So this is the cause of the drop in your aptitude test results…"

"If I fail in blind training, doesn't that mean it won't work when I'm doing it for real either? Then there's no point, is there?"

Homura gripped her head along with the scanner on it.

"I'm taking this back with me! I'll train at home!"

"That's some good spirit, but that would be bad. It's illegal to take that off club premises. It's an expensive piece of equipment, after all."

"Isn't it fine? The one in this club who needs this device the most is me, who's aiming to be a Mage, right? Senpai is also a proper Magic Warrior, and Touya-kun is a Light-Weight Warrior."

"I'm sorry, Homura-san. Unfortunately, taking it outside is not allowed. Right now, your training using the scanner can only be done when you come to the club building…"

Seeing Homura's displeased face, Ameno smiled with sympathy.

"…For example, the scanner can also be used like this—if you choose yes, the die will rotate to the right. If you choose no, it will rotate to the left."

"Oh, what's this? A game?"

Homura leaned forward while sipping her tea through a straw.

"Question. Are crows white?"

"Crows? Well, of course they're—"

The die moved with a twitch.

…[No] meant rotating left.

"Is the square root of fifty greater than four?"

Right… No, the reverse… left turn [No].

"Is your younger sister impertinent, Homura-san?"

Right turn [Yes]. Fervently.

"Are you a virgin?"

"Buh!"

Homura instantly thrusted the console towards the other end of the table/

Ameno nodded with a self-satisfied expression.

"I see."

"I've been tricked…!"

Homura planted her blushing face down on the desk.

"—As you can see, it can also be misused to infringe on people's rights like this, so permission to take this equipment outside is quite restricted. And, Homura-san? Don't forget that there's also the choice not to move the die. It's part of the basics."

"Kuh… damn you."

Even so, the display has disappeared just before the die had rolled, so only Touya was left not knowing the answer to the last question. Touya looked at Ameno with an amazed expression.

"…You're interested in that kind of thing?"

"What are you talking about? It's natural to have an interest as a girl my age."

"Is that how it is?"

Having revived from that humiliating trap, Homura now stared fixedly at Ameno.

"By the way, Ame-chan, how are you controlling the console even though you're not wearing a scanner? That's so handy. Is there some trick to that as well?"

"Are you seriously saying that? Didn't you think anything about her was strange earlier?"

"Why? Well, I admit she seems like a weird girl."

"The fact that you can just ignore the issue with that vague explanation shows that you're even weirder."

Ameno glanced furtively around the relatively small standby room.

"Hmm, all clear, it seems. In that case… I will specially show this to you both."

After saying that, Ameno suddenly unzipped her hooded jacket and began unbuttoning her uniform.

"Why are you stripping?"

"I'm doing it now while the demon is away, since Chiayu-san would get angry if she saw me do this."

"S-Stupid, stop it!"

Touya frantically shut the curtains around the standby room.

"Touya-kun, what are you trying to do by shutting the curtains here?"

"Hinooka, shouldn't you be stopping her?"

But Homura glared at Touya with scornful eyes.

"…If you're showing that much restraint, then that means you do have some interest. So, Ame-chan, will you show it to just little old Onee-san?"

"Yes…… Hnn…"

When Ameno shifted her underwear, parting lines of light appeared just below the location of her heart. Her chest pushed out and unfolded while making a mechanical sound.

"_____!"

Homura's eyes grew huge.

"A-A… A robot! Ame-chan, you're a robot!?"

"Yes. I'm not human."

"…Amazing…"

Touya also seemed to have steeled himself for it, but he still couldn't help being shocked when he saw the real thing. Unable to win against his curiosity, he timidly peeked at her.

"So your comment for the [Yamato Nadeshiko] project wasn't just a joke."

"Mumuh? You don't seem so surprised, Takumi-san? I know you heard about it from Chiayu-san, but still."

"S-Sorry, I am surprised. I am, okay? But you know, after having seen Nutella and senpai as an Elf… something like a robot isn't that mind-blowing."

"What do you mean, something like a robot!? That should be the most surprising one of them all!"

Ameno stood up from her chair.

Homura hurriedly held up Ameno's jacket as it began to slide off.

"My body is the latest bipedal test model, proudly built by the Honba Institute. My fuel cells were made by the Toubashi Institute to withstand even conditions in the polar regions. My optics system was made by Nikon. My expression control and vocal cords were made by Yamaha and the Great N Institute. Every bit of me is 100% Japan-made!"

"By Honba Institute, you mean that automobile company? The same brand as my family's car?"

"Yes. The development lab where I was born is part of the Honba Institute."

Ameno joined her hands together happily, showing how she didn't lose her humanness even with her chest hatch opened.

"At first, I didn't believe it myself until I saw her close up and tried checking her pulse."

"I can replicate both a pulse and heartbeat, you know? I just purposefully turned it off back then."

"…You're right, I can hear the beating."

Homura peeked into Ameno's eyes and observed her carefully while touching her hairline and her soft fingers.

"Engineering technology to make a humanoid robot is quite advanced today. It's just not highly sought after due to the needed investment and cost. There are even rumors that half of the US President's guards are robots."

Touya folded his arms together, impressed.

"…Not sought after, huh. It's true that there might be a lot of people who think robots should be robot-like."

"Is that so?" Homura asked with a tilt of her head in confusion.

"In the end, it was decided according to the development chief's personal interest, though."

"That person is a bit of a pervert, huh."

"Well, I can't deny that. That person is probably drinking together with Chiayu right now. And besides, even if I look like this, I'm actually the trump card for dealing with the shortage of Japan's Nutellan investigators, you know?"

"Right! Let's go together on the next expedition!"

"Yes, I'd really like to accompany you."

"We get it, so could you please put your clothes back on already?"

"I'm a robot, so it's not embarrassing for me!"

"But it is for me."

"I still haven't shown you the most important part—this."

The semi-transparent cover over the center of her chest section opened, and a transparent green gem appeared from inside.

Lines of line appeared and disappeared as if twinkling across its surface.

"This is my brain… It's called a [soul stone]."

"A soul stone…"

"Soul stones are a precious mineral that has been discovered on Nutellan. The phenomenon known as 'me' is composed of light circuitry made using this soul stone's properties, a central nervous system which runs using surreptitious feedback with the attached body and a memory storage device. Everyone else has thinking reed, but I have a thinking stone."

Ameno wore a triumphant expression.

"I don't really get it… but your heart is really pretty, Ame-chan."

Homura gazed fixedly at the stone, drawn by its radiance.

Ameno smiled proudly.

"Thank you very much. But it doesn't feel real to me that this stone is 'me'. As I thought, everything including this body—"

"Can I a touch it a bit?"

"Wait, stup—"

Before Touya could stop her, Homura grabbed and lifted out the soul stone, and Ameno's movements completely halted with a jerk.

"Wah, scary, Ame-chan's face is scary—w-what do I do, Touya-kun!?"

"S-S-Stupid, hurry, hurry up and put it back!"

"L-L-Like this? I-It's not going in."

"The other way, the other way!"

With a beep, the stone's attachment device clicked into place.

The soul stone regained its light.

"—Ebaraking enkloden zess vodai—Everything including this body is myself."

The other two carefully watched Ameno's condition's while sweating on their brows.

"…What's wrong, you two?"

"No, nothing."

"Nothing at all."

"Fufufu, I'm telling you both this with an open heart, you know."

Her chest panel silently returned shut.

"…Y-You really wanted to use that pun, huh."

Ameno grinned.

"Have you had that body since you were born?"

"This is the fourth major overhaul I've had. When I still wasn't aware of my surroundings, I had a much smaller body."

"So you grew up gradually from a baby? That's just like a human."

"That's right. Now I too can finally help as a member of the Exploration Club and…"

Ameno once more looked down at her current appearance in front of Touya and Homura.

She pulled close her unfastened clothes and shrank in on herself.

"Umm… this is… really embarrassing after all…"

Homura and Touya were also confused by her extremely emotional expression as she turned red down to the tips of her ears.

"Didn't you say before that you didn't mind since you're a robot?"

"At first, I was thinking of finally getting to show my body interior to someone besides the development lab's researchers and Chiayu, so I just did it on the spur of the moment… umm… should I instead say that it's embarrassing because I'm a robot…?"

"You're not a robot, but a golem, remember?"

Professor Fujimori entered through the ajar door to the standby room with an astounded expression.

And accompanying her was the club president Misasagi, who blinked several times at the sight of Ameno's half-naked state.

"We bring provisions."

"Good, day. Sorry for, being late."

Misasagi was blushing a little as she spoke.

"Hey there, president. T-Thanks for your hard work today."

As Homura spoke with a strained smile, Ameno hurriedly fixed her appearance from behind her.

"Sensei, you went to a drinking party, didn't you?"

When asked that by Touya, Fujimori scratched her crumpled hair.

"I ran into someone I didn't want to meet and was pulled along. It's fine, it's fine. The Exploration Club is what's most important to me. Here, have some sushi."

"So you don't deny that you neglected your promise to train with me and went out drinking…"

"You probably ran away from Hirosuke-san again, right? Really now…"

Ameno spoke bluntly while hiding behind the shoulders of the disbelieving Homura.

"What was that?"

"And please don't call me a golem, Chiayu-san. It doesn't sound cute at all."

"If there were robots made from such a half-baked breakthrough like you, it would be rude to the researchers who are seriously developing robots. And don't call me Chiayu."

Fujimori dropped down onto a pipe chair and sloppily crossed her legs.

Touya went to help senpai prepare tea.

"In the first place, if they were going to make you a body, why didn't they make it a car with four wheel drive or an off-road bike? Those would have been way more convenient, you know?"

"Of course not! How could you say that, treating my individuality functions as a car navigator!"

"Personally, I'm glad that Ame-chan is a girl."

Homura innocently murmured while rummaging through the bag of provisions Fujimori had brought.

"If she were a car or bike, we wouldn't be able to talk while drinking tea like this, and she wouldn't be able to do club activities with us. Right, Touya-kun?"

"Is that your mental image of club activities? Well, it's certainly livelier around here that way."

Ameno looked at Fujimori triumphantly at first, but then hung her head apologetically.

"…Just hearing you both say that makes me happy. If only I could go exploring with you all. But there are still several problems…"

"Really? Don't worry about it! Even someone like me managed to do it without any prior preparation."

"As if. Your first expedition was full of problems."

"As if you're one to talk, Touya-kun."

As the three first year students conversed fussily with each other, the club president and Fujimori exchanged looks.

Misasagi calmly held out a notebook.

"—Ameno-san, here."

"This is… a student notebook!?"

"Yes. Sorry for, the wait."

Ameno wordlessly stared at the notebook.

"The school's authorization, was given, and the student council also, approved it just, earlier. After the formal, procedures have, finished, you'll be able to, participate in lessons, as a Seiran High, student."

"……I'll be able to go to school with everyone…"

"Ameno, you should thank Misasagi for having gone out of her way to mediate for you, you know?"

Though she said that, the way Professor Fujimori made a money sign with her fingers was quite suggestive.

"Congra, tulations."

"Thank you so much… *Hick*—"

As Ameno previously hugged the notebook and cried, Homura put a hand on her shoulder.

"Good for you, Ame-chan. So, where are you? Which class are you in!?"

"Erm… Class C!"

"Then that means she's in my class," Touya said.

"Eeh, with Touya-kun? Not my class?"

Homura glared at Touya, who wore an expression of surprise.

"Personally, I'm relieved. If Hinooka took classes with Ameno, they'd both obviously end up ignoring the lesson completely."

'That's not true. I intend to help with the plan to raise Homura's academic ability as well."

With this, the Seiran High Exploration Club finally had four members.

Everyone besides the experienced club president Misasagi were all newbies and one of them hadn't even participated on an expedition yet, but perhaps they would finally be able to act as a proper club.

They decided to take a breather.

Misasagi did a little performance with the magic simulator for Homura and Touya.

On the other side of the room, Fujimori and Ameno were huddled together over a computer tablet.

"Chiayu-san, look at this. It's the records of the blind test, but…"

"Ah, by Hinooka? It was pretty bad, right?"

Ameno shook her head.

"It's not yesterday's results. This is from the simulation she did just earlier. But it's strange. She got great results with the normal visual feedback test."

Scrolling through the tablet, Fujimori glared at the records.

"You're right, it's strange… You had her try manipulating an octa-model while imagining a hexa-model? She probably couldn't stabilize it because you didn't switch over to multi-mode."

"I tried that. It's true that both models have a dual relationship and have the same number of overall patterns, but in that case…"

"Then, could it unexpectedly be because Hinooka's thoughts are too fast and the computer processing can't keep up?"

"The scanner's time granularity is 2-6 megahertz. It's 260 thousand times faster than the average frequency of brain waves, and 60 thousand times the renewal rate of a person's sight system. Do you think that Homura-san thinks 60 thousand times faster than a normal person?"

"…I don't."

Chapter 14 End

1 What Homura is actually talking about is how Ameno uses the first pronoun "boku", which is a Japanese version of "I" that is primarily used by boys. Since this doesn't translate at all in English, I just simplified it by calling her a "tomboy".

2 Ameno says "my home/place" in furigana, but the kanji beneath it tellingly says "development lab".

3 A popular brand of rice crackers in Japan. Their most distinctive trait is the sugary and salty "Happy Powder" that covers them, and no, I don't know why it's called something that is so easily misconstrued.

4 Ameno actually says "discover" in English here, with the English alphabet and everything. She does this quite often with certain words, but unfortunately, I'm unable to show this in the translation without making it extremely awkward, so it's an aspect of the writing that is inevitably lost in the English version.

5 This line is said by the narrator, who makes comments like these sometimes.

6 What follows here is an exercise in math and logic that I'm not confident I'm able to convey quite right in my translation, but it's basically a gradually escalating exercise in figuring out the number of possible combinations out of a specific series of actions.

7 Uncanny valley: a reference to the phenomenon where a humanoid robot or something similar bearing a near-identical resemblance to a human being arouses a sense of unease or revulsion in the person viewing it, due to the conflicting feelings of similarity and alienation.

GIRLS' TALK
it's hard to join in as the only boy present
happy turns!
color-spammers!
...obscure chestnut, natalie...
eh? you're talking about cute Saeko-san sweets!?

Chapter 15

On a certain weekday night.

Homura, lying sprawled out on her bed in the Hinooka family house, furrowed her eyebrows every time she turned the page of the technical book on Nutella.

Tomorrow, she would finally be going out on her second mission. The necessary magical energy to send investigators to Nutella and back had apparently finished being charged by the Transport Ring.

This time, Homura had been informed of the departure time and objectives beforehand, giving her the time to prepare her heart.

"The passage of time on Nutella is six times faster than Earth's… That means, since the planned duration for this mission is sixteen hours… we'll be spending ninety-six hours, that is, roughly four days on Nutella. That's more than double that of the last mission. Uwah, that's so brutal."

Homura was wracking her brains over the various pieces of equipment she'd been taught about during club time, but her head was mainly occupied with the thought of clothes.

"We'll have to wear the same clothes the entire time… wait, the same clothes? No way, I'll stink. I'll definitely end up getting sweaty. It'd be good if we could take a bath like last time, but there's no way to know what will happen, especially since we're going into unexplored territory…"

Misasagi-senpai and Professor Fujimori were taking preparatory measures for the sake of the scarcely experienced investigator in their group.

—However, that was primarily regarding matters of safety. Even if stinking of sweat and having unwashed hair were matters of life and death for Homura that occupied the majority of her worries, Misasagi and the others saw them as trivial problems that were easily ignored if the weather was a little stormy on site.

"In the end, I have to take care of myself, huh. Self-responsibility, and all that. Just as I thought, if I want to go through it comfortably… no one will scold me for it there, but I should still take responsibility for what I do…"

She barely managed to brush away the sleepiness overcoming her then.

While lying on her bed, she wrote down notes of what she currently understood about the Exploration Club and Nutella.

Nutella was discovered twenty years ago.

It was discovered by a man-made satellite constructed by the government of the Republic of India, in accordance with the conjecture of its existence first proposed by Dr. Chandler, the genius mathematician who won both the Fields Prize and Nobel Prize. Until then, only a small number of mathematicians and physicists supported the hypothesis regarding the existence of Nutella.

Using a satellite equipped with a non-optical lens known as a Hollow Axis telescope, scientists captured images of a giant planet that existed as a pair to Earth. It is a green planet with an orbital ring and countless natural satellites like Saturn, but with oceans and land like Earth.

The discovered planet was given the title 'Imaginary Earth'. The name for it used in recent years, 'Null Terra', was shortened to the popular name 'Nutella'[1]*.*

One Nutellan day is equivalent to four hours on Earth. One year there equals sixty days here.

Its surface area is a hundred and twenty times larger than that of Earth. This is an astounding size that is nearly equivalent to that of Jupiter. The surface gravity changes according to latitude; in equatorial regions, it is about 0.8 Gs, and at the poles it exceeds 1.5 Gs.

Fortunately, the gravity in the continental region around the high school base camps is nearly equivalent to 1 G, serving as no hindrance to the actions of the club members. Either way, this gravity is far too light in any region considering the sheer enormity of the planet and is one of Nutella's many mysteries.

"True, if our body weight was two or three times heavier, we wouldn't be able to do anything, let alone exploring!"

She fretted with anxiety just over the difference of a hundred grams on her bathroom scale, so suddenly having to carry luggage weighing between fifty and a hundred kilograms would be impossible for her.

The world boiled with excitement at the appearance of this amazingly vast frontier.

People cheered, were numbed at the abundance of treasures hidden there, and finally burned with desire, creating a new military tension. The antagonism between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India was especially fierce, and it even grew into an armed conflict that engulfed the whole world.

However, even amidst all that, observation and research of Nutella continued, and scientists discovered that the path to reach the Imaginary Earth was extremely narrow.

They discovered the need for Transport Rings. And also the age limit.

The Transport Rings needed to visit Nutella were explained to be a kind of celestial body constructed mathematically.

The transport process is similar to cryptanalysis work. A unique cypher key containing hundreds of digits is converted into a crystallized arrangement and embedded in the Transport Rings. In order to make a single Transport Ring, you have to calculate orbital factors over many weeks using a super-computer.

The only person who can create Transport Rings is the original discoverer, Dr. Chandler, who possesses the Master Key with the orbital revolution of Nutella.

However, the doctor did not take action to favor solely his homeland of India with this knowledge and technology.

In a famous speech made at the UN headquarters in New York, Dr. Chandler declared that Nutella was the future of all humankind.

Eventually, under the leadership of the UN and the doctor, the Sriharikota Treaty was established, named for the satellite launch base in India. Its contents were nearly the same as the Antarctic Treaty, forbidding military applications of Nutella and its associate technologies, and highlighting the freedom of scientific investigation and international cooperation.

Thus, the United Nations Pioneering Imaginary Earth Program (UNPIEP) was founded and, under the condition of allowing UN inspections, Transport Rings were distributed to all countries throughout the world.

"…And all this happened about ten years ago."

At the time, Homura was six years old. It was a huge event to adults, but it was something completely irrelevant to the world of children. Though, of course, that wasn't necessarily true in countries where armed conflicts occurred as a result.

"But, the whole thing wasn't actually irrelevant to children…"

An IE Response is needed to activate the Transport Rings. An IE Response is described as whether or not a person can physically accept a mathematical system different from the mathematics expressed in our world's physical space.

It is public knowledge that currently all investigators who have succeeded in activating the Transport Rings and visited Nutella have been between the ages of seven and nineteen, which is considered underage in many countries.

In other words, adults cannot use the Transport Rings to go to Nutella. How disappointed and jealous the adults must be!

Due to the danger of activities on Nutella, the UN decided to restrict the ages for investigators to be between twelve and eighteen. In Japan, this age requirement was further narrowed amid the chaos of the

initial era of exploration, and became limited to ages between fifteen and eighteen (in accordance with school years).

Furthermore, IE Responses differ not only according to age, but by individual differences as well. Only one person out of fifty can endure the transport process. In Japanese high schools, there are only two or three people every year who meet the qualifications. Investigators are rare and precious.

"Investigators were born throughout the world, and those who took part in the first expeditions to Nutella are part of the so-called First Generation—the era of Fujimori-sensei and her contemporaries, in other words. I can't even imagine the hardships of those real-life pioneers…"

That's right. Fujimori-sensei, despite how she looks, was once an investigator. She was part of the initial generation who went from former investigators to directors who supervise the present generation's investigators.

That framed picture that Homura had seen on sensei's desk.

The people featured in it were Fujimori-sensei's party of comrades who explored the untrodden Nutella, the Japanese version of the Right Stuff.

"Speaking of which, what did Mori-chan do when she was an investigator? I think she said she was bad at magic? Doesn't seem like she'd be a good teacher in that regard… I'll try asking Ame-chan about it…"

While mumbling that to herself, Homura turned face-up on her bed and noticed a faint vibrating sound. It wasn't from the cell phone beside her pillow.

She lifted herself up with a rustle and took out the UNPIEP-marked terminal from her bag.

"—It's from senpai."

On the terminal's screen was a text from club president Misasagi.

The message title was "Can you sleep?". The text expressed how she worried for Homura. However, one of Homura's prided points was that she had never once failed to sleep due to anxiety.

"'I'm fine. I've also finished reviewing all the related material. I'm going to try cooking something up later tonight, so please look forward to it'… and there."

She sent her reply.

Sending texts with the terminal was exactly the same as a cell phone. But the accompanying strap was boring-looking, so she was considering what to replace it with.

She suddenly noticed the Rubik's Cube that Ameno had pushed onto her lying on her desk, but after arranging one face of it, she gave up on it. As expected, it was far too big to attach to her terminal.

"……"

Even when she tried to distract herself like that, her anxiety over the mission continued to grow stronger.

As a countermeasure towards wolves, Homura had received one of the Exploration Club's standard pieces of equipment, a batch of anti-bear tear gas spray. It was strong enough to reach even the nose of a bear fifteen meters away. Senpai and Touya had received anti-savage-dog training from a police dog school. As expected, that kind of training was still too hard for Homura, and her participation in that training had been postponed, but even when a German Shepherd had been brought out to lightly lean over her as a test, her body hadn't been able to move at all.

Though its precise effectiveness was unknown, she and the others had also been injected with an anti-rabies vaccine. *If I actually end up in a situation where I'm bitten, I think things will be plenty chaotic even without worrying about rabies,* she had vaguely thought to herself when she'd received it.

However, what plagued Homura's heart most of all was the human figure she'd seen that night.

The young ones set out to Nutella.

The heavy equipment used by those first investigators was just like those used by astronauts.

However, Nutella's environment turned out to be shockingly similar to that of Earth's.

Scientists had learned that plants existed on Nutella through their satellite observations, but the plants that the investigators collected actually had a common genetic structure with Earth vegetation, clearly proving that there had been a genetic exchange between Nutella and Earth in the past.

A method to travel to Nutella had existed long before the planet's discovery by Dr. Chandler. It was hypothesized to have been a result of natural phenomena.

The animals were also the same. Many animals resembling Earth species were discovered, and species already extinct on Earth along with those who had undergone unique development and adaptation on Nutella were found as well.

If Earth and Nutella came into existence at around the same time, it wouldn't be strange for the descendants of dinosaurs who have already gone extinct on Earth to still be striding through the land on Nutella even now. However, dinosaurs have never been found there. Though giant reptiles bigger than crocodiles and sharks as huge as whales do appear to exist there…

The principal complaint of those who strongly oppose these investigative activities is over the danger of bringing back unknown viruses and species that would serve as a threat to Earth's flora and fauna, as well as the similar fear that items brought from Earth and the excrements of investigators would pollute Nutella's precious nature.

It is also true that countries who were late to the competition to training investigators and don't think well of the UN's authority in the matter purposefully fanned such public complaints.

However, the trigger that caused such negative arguments to be turned on their head was the visible traces of human habitation found one by one on Nutella.

"Our brethren, perhaps our ancestors, once lived on that magnificent planet—we have found our second homeland," it was said.

This created an even bigger impact that drove people to Nutella once more. Though we have yet to understand their civilization and way of life, the debate over whether or not to pioneer Nutella had since then shifted greatly over to the pro-side of the argument.

The ancient castle that Homura and the others use as their base camp is also made from refurbished ruins left behind by these Nutellans. Thinking back on it, how reassuring must it have been for investigators to have that stone castle to weather the wind and rain, preserve their food and await their return from their expeditions?

"…Well, even if I don't know anything about this kind of stuff, it won't really cause a problem."

Throwing her pen down on her itemized list of notes, Homura fell back face-up on her bed.

Until now, Homura hadn't paid any heed to the successive discoveries regarding Nutella, only absentmindedly acknowledging it as international news. She hadn't had any trouble living without inconvenience that way. At most, she made some mistakes and lost points on her Social Studies tests.

"Frankly, the whole thing is unrelated to any of us even now… After all, in the end, we still don't understand anything."

The current Hollow Axis telescope satellites were unreliable for observing the ground surface in fine detail, unable to distinguish whether the lines carved across the surface were natural valleys or man-made canals.

Even if you added up all of the land that investigators throughout the world have explored over the past ten years, it wouldn't even amount to a thousandth of Nutella's entire surface. Just how much would Homura and the others be able to expand that explored area in only three years?

"It's way too vast… if only we at least had horses…"

She had no experience riding horses, but Homura still found the image of dashing across the land on horseback gallant in her imagination.

She had heard that there were also groups who rode mountain bikes, but unfortunately the area that Homura's club was in charge of was apparently too dangerous for that.

She got another message on her terminal.

This time, it was from Kamikoma-senpai.

"Koma-senpai…? Ahahaha!"

The message title was "Pure Fail".

The attached image showed Kamikoma-senpai's tragic face covered in toothpaste, after having let her electric toothbrush slip out of her hand. Behind her was a pet dog, yawning as if in exasperation at her.

"…'A Scottish Terrier, how cute'—and there."

After she sent her reply immediately, Homura suddenly thought of something and picked back up the terminal.

She called one of the registered numbers within it.

[Hey there. Shalom[2].]

Kamikoma-senpai's high key voice came through the speaker.

"Good evening, Koma-senpai. Did you finish brushing your teeth?"

[Yeah. Right now I'm wrestling with Eddie-kun, who loves toothpaste. And he's a Welsh Terrier, not Scottish, by the way—hey, don't bite my fingers!]

Homura could hear a dissatisfied growl and scratches against a wooden floor from behind Kamikoma's scolding voice.

"Ah, sorry. I've never heard of Welsh Terriers before. How nice, I wish we had a dog or cat at my place too."

[You should raise a dog for sure. Homura, are you in the dog faction? Or the cat faction?]

"I'd… like to raise a koala, personally. They don't seem like they need much taking care of either."

[They also get lonely when you don't take care of them, you know? Though it seems koalas can become amazingly keen and nimble when you give them regular animal feed instead of eucalyptus leaves. And their claws are super nasty.]

"That's scary. Then, what about a sloth—"

[When you go that far, it seems like you're the one who wants to be raised as a pet here. Shall I take custody of you at my place?]

"Please do. I'd like a proactive owner, with the three meals a day with naps included package."

A laugh mixed with disbelief and self-mockery leaked through the terminal.

[You're going to Nutella tomorrow, right? Be careful. I pray that it's sunny there for you. It's worst when it rains, making it hard to move at all.]

"Yes, thank you very much. Is your group's next mission at a different time, Koma-senpai?"

[Ours is next week. It's normal for neighboring schools to have different transport days. We also have more members than you guys, so it takes more time for our Transport Ring to charge. Well, truthfully, I want to go so much that I would even do it alone if I could.]

"…I can kinda get that. When you have too much free time, it gets scary, somehow."

[Yeah. It feels like you're doing a bungee jump every time.]

Hiyoshizaka High's Exploration Club had a deep cooperative arrangement with Homura's. The areas they were each in charge of were adjoining, and there was lots of information they could share between each other, such as regarding the weather over there. By contrast, Professor Fujimori didn't

talk about Hiyoshizaka High that much. Though, both club presidents were friendly with each other, so it wasn't really a problem.

"Have you also received Ranger training like Misasagi-senpai?"

[I played wind instrument music in middle school. Ah, but I did participate in the Boy Scouts when I was a kid, you know?]

"Boy Scouts? Even though you're a girl?"

[There just weren't any Girl Scouts nearby. I was jealous of my older brothers, who participated in the Boy Scouts every week, so I pretended to be a boy myself.]

"That's so crazy."

[That's why it can't be helped that I'm called mannish, I suppose. Well, that experience also turned out to be useful in the Exploration Club, so it's kind of complicated for me. Rather…]

"Rather?"

[It might have been effective for working the guys in my club hard. Before I knew it, I ended up becoming the club president.]

"Isn't that because of your innate personality?"

[At least call it character.]

Homura would have really liked to see the small-statured Kamikoma-senpai dominating the male club members. She would probably get the chance at some point, when Seiran and Hiyoshizaka's respective Exploration Clubs went on an expedition together.

"Umm, Koma-senpai…"

[Hmm? Ah, sorry. You're going to bed now?]

"No, not that…"

The memory of that human figure in the forest flashed through Homura's mind. But asking about it would be… Would asking for sympathy and consolation about something only she'd seen solve anything? And Kamikoma-senpai had also told her not to lightly talk about it either.

Thus, what reflexively came out of Homura's mouth was the name of her classmate.

"…Umm, it's about Kujou-san."

[Yeah, what about Orie? Is she doing well?]

"Kujou-san is doing things at her own pace as always. The truth is, it's more about me, err… I'd like to get along with her more, you know?"

[Hmm?]

"I get to go through a various experiences and have fun every day in the Exploration Club, but as I thought, I want to prioritize my life as a female high school student, like a normal girl…"

[You just said something I can't overlook there, but… so what, you want a chance to get closer to Orie?]

"Yes. So, if possible, could you maybe tell me more about your past with Kujou-san—"

[What do you like about Orie?]

Kamikoma suddenly asked her that.

"…She's cute?"

[There are lots of cute girls out there. And Orie is, as you can see, unsociable, so that cancels it out, doesn't it?]

"…She's good with the violin…"

[That isn't limited to her alone either. Do you like violinists, Homura? Or do you want to learn the violin?]

"That's… not it. Like I thought, do Kujou-san and I not fit each other…?"

[……]

After taking a little while to think, Kamikoma said this.

[I think it's pointless getting some kind of advice from me to get along better with Orie. Orie's intuition is quite sharp, so she'll immediately notice something like that. If she knew that I thought something like 'She seems so pitiful without friends', she'd break off her relationship with me this time.]

"I see… Yeah, you're right. Sorry for asking."

Leaning back against the bed, Homura hung her head shamefully.

But suddenly, a kind-sounding sigh came through the terminal's speaker.

[But, you know, I'd be really happy if you and Orie became friends.]

Kamikoma-senpai at the music club.

The golden saxophone.

The flame-like red violin.

Kujou Orie's black, jewel-like dress.

The link of the four-beat rhythm that wrapped the stage in a deep timbre.

[Sorry, I spoke too harshly before. I also like Orie as she plays the violin. Homura, if you ever realize what about that girl you truly like, please tell it to her straight up.]

When Homura went downstairs, she found her mother preparing boxed lunches in the kitchen.

This was an unexpected sight, considering how her mother was usually early to bed.

Counting the prepared boxed lunches on the kitchen countertop while taking out some milk from the fridge, Homura tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Huh? Mom, tomorrow's boxed lunch…"

Homura shouldn't actually need one for tomorrow, but there were three portions for her father, Tsuyu and herself there.

There were only morning lessons tomorrow.

The plan was to transport as soon as lessons ended. She was told that it was much preferable to have a light meal before transporting. Well, as long as she didn't turn queasy with transport sickness like Touya, she would probably be fine.

"This is a good luck charm from Narita-san temple."

After having gotten her glass of milk, Homura went over to the dining table and found a good luck charm for safe travels abroad there.

"I heard that you're going on your first expedition tomorrow, Homura-chan. So I went to visit the temple and prayed a hundred times."

"A hundred times!? Really?"

Homura's mother made a slightly proud-looking pose in her apron.

"That's right. I prayed a hundred times. It's surprisingly simple."

Homura's mother reproduced the original prayer of clapping her hands together and entreating the gods repeatedly right where she stood. That might have been slightly different from how the proper way of praying a hundred times was supposed to be done traditionally…

And sorry, Mom. This isn't actually my first expedition.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Yes, you're welcome. Tsuyu-chan went along with me. She was in charge of offering the hundred yen coins."

Homura could just imagine the two of them standing side by side in front of the offertory box, her mother praying zealously while Tsuyu kept throwing in hundred yen coins with a bored expression.

"Ahaha, thanks for your hard efforts. I'll have to thank Tsuyu later as well."

"I really thought about giving you a ceremonial arrow or bamboo rake, but Tsuyu said you can't bring those kinds of things with you. So please make do with just a boxed lunch and good luck charm."

"No, no, it's quite reassuring."

The good luck charm she placed on her palm was the standard synthetic charm that you could find anywhere, but Homura could feel some faint warmth from it.

"Dad… still gets displeased when we bring up the Exploration Club, doesn't he?"

"That's true. I also worry about you returning late, though."

Taking a rest from the food preparation, her mother also came over to the dining table.

"But your father did praise Touya-kun. He said that you found a reliable boy this time. Out of the boys you've brought home before, he might be the first one your father's ever praised."

Homura couldn't help smiling wryly.

"Well, it's true that he seems to be popular with adults… His behavior is just like a Bubble-era salaryman that Dad talks about a lot. By contrast, Tsuyu seems to hate him, though…"

"It'd be nice if Touya-kun came every morning. I'd even make him breakfast, you know?"

"No way, no way, Tsuyu would never allow it."

Their early morning running sessions were continuing even now as part of Homura's daily routine. Miraculously so!

Had Homura ever continued a single thing for more than three days? And voluntarily at that. No, she hadn't. It was only natural that her father would look at her so differently as a result.

In any case, after Homura got properly used to it, Touya stopped visiting the Hinooka household every morning.

Frankly, she wanted to laze off on days when there were no supervising eyes to watch her, to the point where Homura had thought, *Yeah, let's just skip today, I'm going to skip, wahaha*, and let her guard down by actually doing it, but Touya made sure to come check up on her once every week.

Even though she'd only skipped one day, she'd been seen through after running for only a minute the next day Touya came to check, and her training menu had been increased further as a result. She really had no way of escape anymore.

"Your father also said he might consider running with you as well."

"I don't think I'd like that…"

If that happened on top of everything else, then she really would be no match for Touya, who regularly came to look over her studies in the library after school. She'd kept getting indebted to him ever since joining the club.

When she asked, out of unjustified anger, "You probably play around all the time, right?", he made a curious expression and answered, "Is there anything more fun than the Exploration Club's activities?"

So she thought about at least treating him to breakfast.

If she were a normal girl in this situation, she would probably do a special service like giving him a handmade boxed lunch, but she had learned the error of that the hard way during the Shinryoku Festival. And she was already giving everything she had in her club activities, studies and early morning running. It was a full course of non-stop work.

She was going to turn to ashes at this rate. That was something that Homura herself understood.

Just how long would this intense lifestyle continue? She felt like that kind of formless worry was gradually raising the water level of her heart drop by drop.

What would happen when it overflowed? That was something that even Homura couldn't imagine.

"—You can stop if you want, you know."

Homura's mother murmured that, as if she had seen through Homura's thoughts.

Homura, who had begun unconsciously hanging her head, raised it quietly to look at her mother.

In front of her was her mother's usual gentle smile.

"……"

"Sorry. That wasn't really much of an encouragement. But even I've had times where everything was suffocating to me and I ran away, you know?"

Looking at Homura, her mother continued speaking.

"However, make sure you at least treasure your friends. The number of people you meet in your life is already settled, after all."

Anxiously, Homura stared at her mother's fingertips.

"I think family is more important, personally. I don't want to worry you all."

"It's fine, it's fine. Don't fret over us."

Despite those refreshing words, Homura became slightly dejected.

"Mom, you don't think this family is important?"

"Me?"

Nonchalantly tilting her head, her mother smiled.

"What I treasure most are, of course, you, Tsuyu-chan and Masafumi-san… but I wouldn't choose family over everything else."

"Eeh?"

"Friends can be replaced, you know?"

"Eeeeh? Didn't you just tell me to treasure them?"

"That's exactly why."

Holding up each of her hand's index fingers in turn, her mother continued.

"Good friends and bad friends—beneficial friends and harmful friends. When you start differentiating and grading them like that, you'll end up having no one close to you eventually. That's a very sad thing."

"……"

Seeming to be reminded of something, Homura listlessly lowered her head.

"But… treating everyone equally and the same way… that's absolutely impossible."

"Yeah. I won't tell you to do that. There probably isn't anyone who can perfectly interact and socialize with others. You just have to do what you can. But—"

If you opened the door with your own strength.

If you walked somewhere you've never known before.

"Homura-chan, if you find someone you want to be friends with and be together with from the bottom of your heart… Would you give that person special treatment and treasure them? Going to many places and meeting various people is a very wonderful thing."

"……"

That wish was hidden at the core of her mother's feelings as she supported Homura's attempts.

Though, Homura believed that, if the time ever came when she clearly felt that way, it would probably be something like destiny, and with someone she could call her lover.

"It's all right. You can stop if you want."

Her mother, as always, spoke frankly and nonchalantly.

"There's no such thing as something you can't do over again, after all."

"…Yeah."

Chapter 15 End

1 To elaborate, “r” and “l” are pronounced the same way in Japanese, so “Terra” and “Tella” are effectively the same here. I’ll still keep writing it as “Nutella”, however, since it sounds catchier and seems like a better planet name than “Nuterra” in English.
2 Shalom: Hebrew word meaning “peace”, generally used as a greeting and farewell salutation.

Chapter 16

"The analysis results on the pieces of mountain dog fur that you picked up came back. It seems to be from a species that bears a strong resemblance to the extinct Hokkaido wolf."

The day of their next mission.

After the club members had finished their preparations and gathered in the Transport Room, Fujimori explained the lab results to them.

"However, according to a report from a Hiyoshizaka High party who examined the footprints in the area, this breed seems to be far greater in size than the Hokkaido wolf. Our conjecture says that their total head-and-torso length is 1.8 meters; their body weight is one hundred and twenty kilograms.

Their build rivals that of the Sumatran tiger. They're definitely bigger than any wolves found on Earth. It's a common form of evolutionary adaptation on Nutella."

Club president Misasagi listened to the information seriously.

"The fact that they move in herds instead of acting independently is especially dangerous. If you end up being targeted as prey, there's no way any of you could run away. You'll be forced to confront them in that case."

Touya put his hands on the handles of his brand new swords he had gotten to replace his old ones. Both swords had been tempered so that their reach fit Touya's style as a dual-sword user and were properly balanced to correspond with his additional muscle strength on Nutella.

Compared to that, Homura's self-protection tool was just some tear gas spray, but for her, it was much more reassuring to have than a knife that she didn't know how to use.

Homura felt eager and ready to go as she looked over the sample of the stuff that Fujimori had handed over to her.

But then, Fujimori spoke curtly to her.

"Now then, Hinooka. You don't have to participate this time."

"Eh?"

"You can skip the expedition and stay on standby here in the club building."

Homura couldn't hide her surprise, feeling as if the rug had been pulled out from under her.

"This mission involves traveling through unknown territory. The goal is to fill in some of the blank spots on this map."

Fujimori rolled open a handmade map for them to see.

After Fujimori exchanged a look with Ameno, who was standing next to her, a map of the area around the base camp was displayed on the Transport Room's wall screen.

On the northern area of the map, there was a wedge-shaped grey space. Areas that had already been investigated were displayed in a brighter white hue.

Grainy pictures taken by satellites and three-dimensional topography that was virtually generated based on the surroundings overlaid each other half-transparently in the grey area.

"This area that's sandwiched by these two mountain ranges hasn't been explored by anyone yet. It's covered in fog all year round, and we've never managed to get an unobstructed picture of the place with the satellites due to their limited view schedule never matching up at the right time, unfortunately. But there's definitely a river there, and most likely a lake or a waterfall as well."

"Isn't it a bit similar to the valley where our base camp is…?"

When Homura murmured that, Fujimori grinned.

"That's right. The places where we've found ruins previously have all had some commonalities between them. It's unknown whether or not the land is arable, but a river is necessary to transport the stones to build a castle. Well, in other words, we won't lose anything even if we get our hopes up a bit."

Fujimori rolled up the map and placed it against her shoulder like a bamboo sword.

"Traveling through untrodden territory is the basics of basics for an investigator. There's quite a lot you can learn on this mission, but the difficulty is also greater in return. Very much so—"

"So… you're saying I'd be a hindrance to the team?"

Fujimori turned to look at Homura straight on.

"No matter who they are, no one ever becomes a hindrance on Nutella. We're always short on hands. But if even one person lacks in carefulness, it increases the dangers towards the entire group—that's always the case. This is also Touya's first experience travelling into unmapped territory."

Fujimori directed the same look at Touya.

"What I want to confirm with you two is whether or not you've got the resolve to face ravenous wolves in a situation where you'll be pushed to your physical and mental limits."

"That's…"

Unable to answer immediately, Homura gave a sidelong glance at Touya.

Though there was nervousness in his expression, there was no wavering or doubt. It was a clear expression that gushed with a strong fighting spirit, ready to face any challenge. Somehow, seeing that made Homura irritated.

"Is Ameno-san, still unable to, participate in, expeditions?"

When senpai asked that, Ameno bowed her head apologetically.

"That's the thing… Sorry, president, everyone. The truth is, the results of the dummy test done on me the other day weren't very good. Even if I can endure the transport process, in the worst case scenario, I might suddenly cease working during the expedition without warning…"

"…That'd be bad," Touya said.

"So your participation is postponed again, huh?" Homura remarked.

"But~, you know~, I may be bragging a bit here~, but I'm a hybrid model, so my body is somewhat different from the solid-state electronic goods that you guys normally bring to on Nutella~."

Ameno snuggled up to Misasagi-senpai as if trying to do a sales pitch, but Fujimori grabbed her head and forcefully pulled her away.

"As if they could bring something troublesome that could suddenly become dead weight while climbing and fall down like a rock."

"Ah, did you just refer to me as a lump of rock?"

Ignoring Ameno's complaint, Fujimori glanced over at the time indicator on the wall screen.

"…It's just before noon over on Nutella right now. It's time for your final answer."

Fujimori gazed at Touya and Homura.

"Touya… Looks like I don't even need to bother asking you. How about you, Hinooka?"

"I'll go. I want to try out the magic I worked so hard to train for."

Though her movements were jerky and stilted, Homura still nodded.

Ameno also nodded as happily as if Homura's decision were her own.

"All right then."

Professor Fujimori picked up the faintly glowing Transport Ring from the tray that jutted out of the wall and handed it over to Misasagi.

"I'm counting on you, Misasagi. If you think it's dangerous, use the emergency withdrawal without hesitation."

Senpai nodded firmly.

"Frequently saving is essential, you know," Ameno added.

"Though it's problematic if you use it willy-nilly. Touya, Homura, make sure not to get separated from Misasagi."

"Yes… with the exception of going to the toilet, that is."

"Even when going to the toilet, if possible."

Homura immediately grimaced at Fujimori's words.

Misasagi linked hands with the two of them and prepared for departure.

"May you all stay safe… Ah, please wait a minute. Let me give you guys a farewell ritual for good luck."

"Ah?"

Ameno took out some stones from her pocket and rubbed them together, causing small sparks to scatter in the dimly-lit room.

"…Why are you chinking those rocks?" Fujimori asked

"These are flint stones. You don't know about them, even though you're a Modern Japanese teacher?"

"Of course I know about them, they're used to ward off evil—and they have nothing to do with Modern Japanese. Don't appropriate Japan's historic omens when you're a mere golem girl."

"Like I said, I was made domestically in Japan, you know?"

Homura and the other two stood in a circle with their hands linked in the center of the Transport Room.

As the exaltation of the transport came over Homura, the sight of Ameno trying to stubbornly retort without learning her lesson and getting knocked over by Fujimori blurred within her narrowing vision.

"…Kuh…"

—When the instant of transport passed and Homura's consciousness once more pieced together its focus, the first thing she saw was bright and sharp sunlight. She immediately covered her eyes with her arm.

The sensation beneath her feet was definitely the stone floor of the castle's basement, but she felt warm wind on her cheeks. When she took a step back, she bumped into a wooden pillar right behind her.

"Even though I trained so hard to learn the lighting spell…"

When she timidly opened her eyes, what appeared before here was a sight that was hard to believe.

As if they'd been pummeled again and again by a giant fist, the stacked stones of the walls were shattered in pieces, the pillars were broken, and the roof had collapsed into a huge hole. That was why she could see the sky from the basement.

The Exploration Club equipment that had been stored here was scattered everywhere.

It was a terrible sight, accompanied by a faint burning smell.

"……"

With tight lips, Misasagi-senpai looked over the castle that was a mere shadow of its former self.

"How terrible…"

Touya looked to be feeling queasy after the transport as usual, but he somehow managed to stand up on his own this time.

"A fire… no, a lightning strike…?"

"This isn't a natural disaster."

After swiftly running through the rubble, senpai cautiously observed their surroundings from the top of the small crumbled tower. Her Elven silver hair fluttered in the wind.

There were several animal footprints engraved on the dirt that had been blown out of the ground and scattered everywhere.

Senpai's expression became even more rigid.

"This is similar to leftover traces of magic…"

Homura and Touya gave up on the rubble-covered stone steps and helped each other to climb through the destroyed walls until they at last made it outside.

"The base camp… our home… that we all made together is…"

Senpai was shocked by this hideous scene as she looked it over again.

Homura and Touya also noticed the animal footprints.

"Senpai… could this be…"

Senpai silently nodded.

"…The aforementioned wolves."

Homura felt her own heart clench at the sight of senpai's sorrowful expression, which made her look as if she could collapse to her knees at any moment.

"Were they looking for food here…? This is way too much," Touya said bitterly.

"Doesn't it look like they overturned the place as some kind of prank…? Like how crows fish through collected garbage," Homura conjectured.

"A prank? Do they have some kind of grudge against us? Damn it."

"…They tracked us back here… and a while ago too."

According to President Misasagi's analysis, the animal footprints were two or three days old. She gave the same estimation for the time of the base camp's destruction. There hadn't been any rain here for the past few days, so the footprints appeared to have been well preserved.

The only piece of fortune within misfortune here was that they hadn't transported to Nutella in that dangerous moment while it was all happening.

Homura was given a small analog camera and put in charge of taking pictures to record the scene. It was a camera equipped with a specialized black-and-white photo film that could take pictures even on Nutella.

First, she focused on the animal footprints, and then took pictures of the destroyed castle from different angles.

Handmade furniture crushed by the rubble, cracked wooden casks that had leaked their contents, hand-knitted wool tapestries charred black, paper packages of preserved food covered in dust, including those with goldfish-and-cat stamps on them and even the ones labeled super spicy by Touya.

The only section that had safely escaped the collapse of the castle was the armory, which lay in the deepest part of the castle.

As she watched the remains of all that senpai and her fellow club members had accomplished, Homura's eyes became watery. It was just so sad and wretched.

"—Let's dig out what still seems usable. And we have to secure a place protected from the rain now while we can as well."

Homura was surprised by the club president's words.

"We're not… going back to Earth?"

"Maybe if we were in the middle of a forest or if it was nighttime, but—"

Senpai shook her head.

"This isn't enough of a reason to go back. It's true that… it's sad that it's become like this, but we can just rebuild it again. I'd like to ask for both of your help at that time too, Hinooka-san, Touya-kun."

"…Yes. Of course."

"I'll do whatever's needed."

Touya's words at the end lacked his usual energetic tone, filled with discreetness.

"But, senpai…? Would wild animals be able to do something so extreme like this? Doesn't this reflect some clear animosity?"

"…Perhaps so. Though rare, there are some animals that can use magic. They're highly intelligent and have even been regarded as sacred. The wolves that came here might be such a species…"

Senpai leaned over the ground beside the castle walls and looked at the footprints.

"…If Inari-san were here, she would have been able to figure out more, but…"

Homura didn't miss that sudden murmur by senpai.

"Then…! Then, let's go get Inari-san and come again another time with her! The idea of just going out to investigate as things are is giving me a bad feeling, somehow."

"…We can't rely on someone who's quit the club. Sorry, just forget I said anything," senpai said with a smile to deter Homura from going any further on the subject.

Touya just remained silent and watched as the two of them talked.

"By the looks of it, we have enough food left for the course of our investigation. We can draw out some new water later. If an item looks like it's been run over by a tornado, just give up on it and move on to the next."

When they were told that by senpai, who should be feeling the most pained inside out of all of them, Homura and Touya couldn't say anything in response.

If they considered the situation from senpai's position—

It was true that, if they put off the mission to another time, the equipment left in this torn up camp would wear away from the weather and be damaged by animals, decreasing the items that could still be used even further. They'd also been told that the rainy season was fast approaching.

Homura didn't know if she would have been able to make the decision to continue the investigation after acknowledging that there was such a clear threat present. It felt like this wasn't a case where the lone judgement of their director Fujimori would be enough to proceed either.

While examining the remaining intact stone walls, senpai spoke to the both of them.

"Even if we encounter the wolves, please try not to hurt them. Try to avoid it unless it's absolutely necessary. They're different from the rabbits and deer we use for food. They're animals with a strong sense of territory. If we don't show them that we're harmless, it will harm any further relations with them."

"So we have to endure without fighting back, huh…"

Touya wore a vexed expression. Homura shook her head at the absurdity of it.

"Hurt them… that's impossible anyways! Just look at this place; it's like the ruins of an explosion!"

They took out a spare tent and spread the fabric out diagonally, using a wall in place of a support post, and then moved all the salvageable goods beneath it.

"Hinooka-san, please help Touya-kun for a bit. I'm going to check on the armory."

Saying that, senpai went off deeper into the castle.

"Ye~s… Ah, actually, I'll go too!"

"Hey, don't slack off!"

"I'm taking a toilet break."

While senpai continued walking with a wry smile, Homura chased after her at a small trot.

The armory was dark and gloomy, with its high walls blocking direct sunlight, and the most that peaked through was the slight, reflected light from the Bagel shining in the sky. The room had no traces of being torn apart at all.

"Did the wolves sense that this room was dangerous or something?"

"…I wonder. We don't come in here that much, so there might not be any human scent lingering for them to track here."

Senpai tilted her head in puzzlement at the surprising intactness of the armory.

While wrinkling her nose at the smell of metal and rust-preventing oil, Homura looked over the armory.

"Wouldn't it be better to clean this place up and use it as a new bedroom?"

"That's a good idea."

"The ventilation seems a bit bad, but at least it has a roof. Ugh… but then it'd mean sleeping co-ed…"

"It'll be fine if it's Touya-kun."

"Not that again, senpai. You're too defenseless."

Senpai found her favored bow hanging on the wall of the armory and picked it up. The bow had been carefully stored. Senpai unfolded the collapsible parts and checked the condition of the bowstring.

Meanwhile, Homura looked over weapons and personal tools that she couldn't properly distinguish in the darkness with a disinterested attitude.

"Even Touya-kun has his own personally customized swords. Maybe I should learn how to use a bow. Though a sword is also tempting…"

She picked up a sword from among those that were set leaning on a wooden stand.

Just then, a yellow diamond-shaped stone rolled up to Homura's feet.

"Heh?"

A soft light came out of the stone and floated up into the air. The stone, left behind on the ground, quickly turned black.

The shadows of the scabbards piled up against the wall shifted in accordance to the light's ascent.

Senpai also noticed that something had happened and looked over at Homura.

"Senpai, did you use illumination magic—?"

When Homura turned around to ask, she found threads of flames behind her, which quickly coalesced together until they grew into a fireball.

"……!"

Throwing aside her bow, senpai ran towards Homura.

But Homura, while she could sense the increasing heat from the fireball on her cheek, could only stand there wide-eyed, frozen in place.

"What… is this…"

"Hinooka-san—!"

Misasagi grabbed Homura's arm and pulled her away, while tearing off the leather strap of the canteen at her waist and then throwing it into the air.

"Hi2 (Deuterium)!"

As it soared through the air, the metal canteen suddenly swelled and then ruptured open.

A pale stream of water came out from the crack and expanded into a shield that covered the two of them.

——Flash.

"…?"

As Touya was carrying a wooden box so big that it was twice his weight along his hip, he staggered at the tremor that he suddenly felt through the ground.

Following the sound of stone walls collapsing, an odd noise rang out.

Piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii……

From the black smoke that was now rising up from the other side of the wall, a single plume of white smoke rose up into the sky. That sharp, flute-like sound wasn't anything that Touya had ever heard or learned about before.

"…Eh… Hey!"

After briefly looking up at the trail of smoke while standing there dumbfounded, Touya came back to his senses and started running towards the armory.

Fuuuuuoooooo……

In response to the smoke signal that had been launched, bone-chilling howls answered back from the forest below the castle. Touya felt his hairs stand on end.

While running past the baggage placed alongside the wall, Touya swiftly picked up his personal swords.

Black smoke that had sparks mixed in completely filled the armory.

Pieces of rubble were scattered everywhere, and there were still reverberations left from the explosion's force.

In the midst of blocks of wood that had once served as weapon racks, now turned to charcoal, and swords and protectors that were scattered everywhere, Homura and Misasagi lay piled on each other on the floor while partially buried by the debris.

"____"

Misasagi-senpai carefully lifted herself up and moved her lips to say something.

"…Sen… pai…"

As Homura lay there in a stupor, hearing finally returned to her ears.

"—Are you hurt?"

"…Senpai, did you shield us with magic…?"

"It's a specialty spell of mine."

Misasagi's smile made Homura forget the pain.

That flash of explosion that she had seen over Misasagi's shoulder when she had moved to cover Homura—it was still burned into her retinas. That shield of water had briefly turned into a mirror that blocked the light and seemed to withstand it for an instant, before immediately foaming up and being blown away. Hit by the shock wave, the two of them had been thrown to the other end of the room and slammed against the wall.

"……Kuh…"

"…Senpai?"

The smile disappeared from senpai's face, which now twisted in pain.

"Senpai! Hinooka!"

Touya shouted as he came running into the armory.

"It's bad. This was a trap. They're coming right now… eh…"

"Touya-kun, senpai is—!"

When he saw Misasagi leaning on Homura with her head limp, Touya's breath caught in his throat.

Touya feebly walked forward and went down to one knee.

"Senpai…?"

With Homura's help, Touya held half of senpai's body and raised her up.

There was no response from her. Even with her hair disheveled and sticking to her face, she was still beautiful, looking as if she were just taking a doze.

At the end of her arm that was stretched out limply, her magic ring was glowing.

"Emergency… withdrawal…!"

Looking first at the unconscious senpai and then Homura who looked back at him in sorrow, Touya resolved himself and spoke.

"Hinooka, you activate the Transport Ring in place of senpai. Just do it exactly as you were taught."

Homura nodded stiffly.

"I-It's true that's the only option right now, but senpai said that the transport's chances of success are halved when a person is unconscious—we'll have to leave senpai behind if we go."

"……"

The two of them stared at senpai, and then looked at each other, having come to the same answer at the same time.

"I see."

"Hinooka, you bring senpai to the basement. You should be safe there."

"Yeah—wait, what about you, Touya-kun!?"

"I…"

The two of them could clearly hear several howls in the distance.

The two of them supported each of senpai's shoulders and carried her out of the armory.

Senpai's unthinkable lightness truly made them viscerally feel the strengthening effects of Nutella on their bodies.

According to what they'd been told, the base camp's basement was a place with an orbit established to connect with the Transport Room in the club building on Earth, which would minimize the chances of a transport's failure. If they went there, even the inexperienced Homura and Touya could manage the transport—so was their thinking.

"Senpai! Senpai, wake up!"

Homura desperately called out to her.

She shuddered at the wet sensation that touched her fingers.

Blood, oozing from senpai's uniform, was trickling down along her arm.

"……Damn…"

Touya glared ahead with a grim expression—grey shadows had jumped out from the forest one after another and were now running up the gentle meadow slope.

They were majestic beasts whose size far surpassed what Homura had imagined. Long, burly legs that kicked off the ground. Sharp eyes. And there were a roughly fifteen of the beasts—

Even as they hurried towards the basement, Homura and Touya couldn't take their eyes away from a certain thing.

"…What?"

"There's someone with them."

Their eyes were caught on—

—a young girl wearing blue clothing, who was riding upon the back of one of the wolves.

The pack moved in formation with the wolf that the girl rode at the head, and closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye.

Suddenly, the girl kicked off the back of the wolf and rolled through the grass before swiftly righting herself, and then began running towards Homura and the others with leg strength that was in no way inferior to the wolves.

Touya's fingers moved for the handles of his swords.

"Go, go on ahead!" Touya shouted.

As Homura was left to carry senpai on her own and involuntarily stood petrified in place, not knowing what to do, Touya gave her a push to keep moving before turning around to face the wolves.

Even while running towards the old castle, the blue-clothed girl skillfully slipped her arms into her sleeves without breaking her balance.

"Tekerettsunooooo—"

The instant she stopped and braced her bare feet on the ground, she swung her arms in a wide arc.

"—pa![1]"

With a vigorous shout, she threw something from her hands.

Two yellow lights flew through the air towards Touya, leaving two faint tracks in their wake.

The wolves immediately stopped where they were all at once.

Homura widened her eyes and shouted at Touya.

"Touya-kun—run!"

"—!"

Touya perceived the meaning of those words and the danger approaching him.

With no time to pull his long sword out, he brought it forward with the sheath still attached in a defensive stance and stared straight ahead.

Ka—kaa.

Instead of avoiding the lights, he ran forward to meet them. With flowing movements, he used the sword to deflect one aside, while the other one was sent shooting high up back in the direction it came.

"Get down—!"

Touya shouted that without taking his eyes away from the enemy.

Homura immediately flopped to the ground, covering senpai as she did so.

The stones, their trajectory having greatly diverged from their impact target, became fireballs and exploded in mid-air one after another.

Kyuu… Voooo——

Homura was once again hit by a shock wave that seemed to crush her lungs.

"…Uhyaaah~… Oh?"

The girl, having huddled on the ground while holding down her head, cautiously raised her head back up.

The wolves were also lying face down.

The girl got up into a crouch and reached for a pouch hanging from her waist, but it seemed to be empty, so she discarded it to the ground.

"Go at them, I'm all out!"

It was at that instant—

"Iyaaaaaaaah—!"

The girl raised her head in shock at that piercing fighting yell.

Touya was right before her.

He stepped into range boldly and swung the sheathed sword horizontally with one hand, seeming to graze the side of her face.

But he only managed to hit her hair ornament.

The girl dodged the sword by a literal hair's breadth and jumped backwards, her agility too fast for even Touya's eyes to keep up with.

The girl alighted on the ground on all fours and glared at Touya while taking a low stance that was two swords' lengths away from him.

"Ruuuu…!"

The girl growled, almost like a beast herself.

Touya persistently tried to chase after her without a moment's pause, but he was blocked by the wolves snarling and cutting around towards him.

"You plunged in too far, Touya-kun…! What is he even thinking…!?"

While dragging along senpai by supporting her with her shoulder, Homura walked up to the slope of rubble that led down into the basement.

When Homura tried to adjust her stance and wrap her arm around senpai's back, senpai groaned in pain.

Even tears fell from her eyes, Homura desperately lifted up senpai in her arms and moved down on her butt to slide down the slope without minding getting dirty.

The furious howls of the wolves and Touya's menacing yells, which reached Homura's ears no matter how far away she got, made her heart freeze.

After setting senpai down on the floor in the basement, Homura looked back.

The one who appeared from beyond the wall and nimbly jumped over it was not Touya, but that girl. She rested her hands and feet on the broken wall and looked down at Homura and Misasagi.

"—That one's… injured, huh?"

When she noticed the blood which dyed senpai's clothing, the girl's face, the very picture of innocence, clouded over.

Not caring that she was facing an unknown enemy, Homura shouted back angrily with an expression that threatened to break into tears.

"…Kuh… It's your fault!"

The girl was overwhelmed by Homura's anger.

"Well, it's true that I was an idiot for falling for the trap, but… What's with you guys, suddenly attacking us out of nowhere!? You did all this to our camp!"

After despondently ducking back her head, the girl shook her head like a dog and once more turned to glare at Homura.

"…S-Shut up, you damn thief!"

Cursing at Homura, the girl put strength in her legs and bent forward in preparation to leap straight down at Homura.

"Stay away!"

Homura shouldered senpai over her back and took out the knife on her waist.

"Hi (Hydrogen)——"

She pointed the knife straight at the girl and began to chant.

Making a suspicious face, the girl saw the small flame that appeared at the tip of the knife and realized what Homura was doing.

"—Sekkachimaru!"

The girl yelled as she jumped down off the wall in a flash.

While desperately maintaining her concentration so as not to shatter the pattern she had built up in her mind, Homura squared off against the girl as she landed close by.

The girl had black hair and seemed to be about twelve or thirteen years old. Having lost one of her two hair ornaments, her untied hair hung loosely over her cheek. Even with grass and twigs sticking all over her, her clothing was very high quality with a foreign design on it.

She was definitely the girl that Homura had encountered that night.

As she looked over the girl to gain further confirmation based on what she remembered of that brief chance meeting, Homura started in shock when her gaze turned to one of the girl's wrists.

The bracelet attached was definitely—

"!"

A shadow that seemed to mask the Bagel in the sky above suddenly leaped over Homura.

It was a giant white wolf. Patches of grey fur were on its legs and on the bridge of its nose to its brow.

Not missing the opening Homura gave when she instinctively hunched back, the girl slipped past Homura and jumped at senpai who slept on her back.

The girl slipped her fingers around Misasagi-senpai's harness belt and lifted her up, while she stretched out other arm to reach out to the shoulder of the white wolf and grab its fur.

"What—stop—!"

Homura abandoned the knife and clung to senpai.

The knife lightly bounced against the stone floor.

The fireball that had formerly been on its tip instantly contracted inwards upon itself, and immediately after, its line of fire became jabbed and disarrayed. Magical energy was immediately lost from the pattern, which had abandoned its rotational formation.

"….! Oh no…"

The flame dimmed and turned into thick smoke, which spread out explosively.

The white wolf cut through the smoke enshrouding the place and jumped. It leapt over the stone wall and reached outside the old castle, while three people rode on its back.

However, Homura couldn't withstand the impact from landing and was thrown off to the ground.

While putting up the face-down Misasagi in front of her waist, the girl on the wolf turned to look back at Homura for an instant. But then she immediately clicked her tongue at the surroundings and began calling the other wolves.

"Wait! *Cough*… Wait, are you—"

Homura staggered to her feet and called out to the girl while choking on the regurgitated gastric fluid from her stomach.

However, the girl merely stuck out her tongue hatefully and left Homura in the dust behind.

—Elsewhere.

Touya had been continuing to fiercely hold back and repel the fangs and claws coming at him. In his right hand was his now unsheathed long sword and in his left hand was its sheath, which he was using in place of his usual short sword.

The wolves surrounding Touya began to pull away and withdraw one after another.

Though he found it strange, he still turned to run back to Homura.

"—Are you okay? Where's Misasagi-senpai… Hey, Homura!?"

When he followed the blank gaze of Homura who was standing there dumbfounded, Touya's facial color changed.

"Senpai was… taken away by them…?"

"…I'm sorry…!"

Homura nodded while gritting her teeth and barely keeping herself from sobbing as tears fell from her eyes.

"Let's chase after them! We can't let them get away!"

But even as he said that, the wolves got further and further away, until they disappeared in single file into the forest's animal trails.

"That bracelet…"

"Hey, do you understand me? I'm saying we have to go save senpai!"

"No, that wasn't a bracelet… that was a rattle…"

"What are you babbling about at a time like this…? By rattle, you mean one of those baby toys?"

Touya asked her while unable to hide his irritation.

"Yeah. It's pretty worn out and broken, but I'm sure. I've seen it before—"

Homura grabbed Touya's arm, which was covered in lacerations, and spoke urgently.

"That girl's from Earth. She's a missing child that was abducted three years ago."

Chapter 16 END

1 Tekerettsunopa: This is a word that has no equivalent in English, so it's been left in its original Japanese. It comes from the tale "Shinigami" (Grim Reaper/Death), a Japanese oral story believed to be partially based off the German fairy tale "Godfather Death" by the Brothers Grimm. The word itself is nonsense and has no actual meaning, but it is part of a special charm or incantation that was given to a human man by Death in the story, most likely the reason for its usage as a spell chant here.

Chapter 17

The two of them snatched up their equipment and began chasing after the girl and the pack of wolves.

As they walked, Homura hit Touya's shoulder and let loose complaints.

"Why didn't you come with us!? You just jumped in on your own! Right in the middle of that huge pack!"

"I just thought that I had to lure them away somehow. Otherwise, they might have taken us all out at once by throwing one of those bomb blasts into the basement."

"B-But you repelled one, didn't you!?"

"I just did that on the spur of the moment and… Damn it."

Touya gritted his teeth.

"Yeah, I was wrong. It's just as you say, Hinooka. I should have gone straight to the basement with you both."

Without slowing his walking pace, Touya bowed his head.

"I'm sorry."

"…No, I'm just glad that you're unhurt after all that."

"You too, Hinooka."

Letting out a small chuckle even while sinking in regret, Touya seemed even more adult-like than usual. He was gazing down the path through the woods, still besides himself with worry for the injured Misasagi-senpai.

"The wolves didn't come at me seriously. It was like they were just buying time by keeping me there. They were aiming for senpai from the beginning."

"No way. Why?"

Touya shook his head.

They cautiously surveyed their surroundings and searched for tracks left by the wolves.

The natural and gently curving path through the valley was flanked by the river and mountains on each side, and as long as they didn't try to suddenly cross through the mountains, the terrain didn't open up except towards the south.

If they tried crossing the river for the opposite shore, they should be able to expand their range of sight.

However, at the end of the valley was nothing but a stretch of trees, and the two of them couldn't figure out how best to chase after them.

Fortunately, Homura was able to keep pace with Touya without running out of breath.

"More importantly, that child. Should we call her the wolf girl for now? Anyway, you said she was a missing child, but…"

"You doubt me? It's not just the bracelet; when I looked at her closely, she had the same face as the baby in that picture. It's definitely her."

"Even if she came to Nutella three years ago, she should, at the very least, be over eighteen years old by now. The numbers don't add up."

"Ugh, that's… maybe there was a problem with her physical growth or something…"

"But, certainly, it's more believable than her being a Nutellan. After all, we could understand each other's words. She even used Japanese."

Homura noticed that for the first time now that Touya pointed it out.

"Yeah! She did! But it seemed like she was using a very old dialect. Her clothes too—I've never seen clothes like those."

"……"

As Touya was silently thinking over the range of possibilities, Homura questioned him nervously.

"If we don't catch up to senpai, are we going to be stuck here on Nutella and die by the roadside?"

"No…"

Touya reluctantly shook his head.

"We can just go to Hiyoshizaka High's base camp. It's quite far, but I know its location. If we don't return on schedule, Mori-chan will send out a rescue request and help will come. We'd have to wait several days until Hiyoshizaka High's club members finish preparing and come here, but we won't die. We have food supplies too."

"Ah… I see. There's that option too."

Homura's expression brightened for an instant, but then immediately clouded over again.

"But then, senpai will—"

"We might end up leaving her behind. But she has the Transport Ring."

"…Yeah. If she can just regain consciousness, she should be able to immediately return to Earth."

Homura nodded with hope.

They cut through the forest and arrived at a river.

The flow was slow and gentle here, with several rocks amid the river to act as footholds, and Homura and Touya had already experienced river crossing during their last mission.

After diligently looking over the soft dirt along the riverside, Touya found what he was looking for there.

"Footprints. They're heading north!"

There were still wet tracks left on the rocks jutting out from the surface of the river as well.

After picking back up his baggage, Touya glared at the opposite shore of the river.

"Wait, Touya-kun!"

Just as Touya stepped into the river shallows, Homura called out to stop him.

"Look at these…"

She held out her hands, and grasped in them were the mini-bag with multiple tools and the folding knife that senpai had been carrying.

"They were all abandoned on the ground over there. And…"

With a trembling voice, she held out a silver ring between her fingers.

"This is the Transport Ring…!"

"……!"

It was definitely the Transport Ring that Misasagi-senpai had been wearing on her finger.

They didn't know why it had been dropped here.

Even though it was their most important tool and indispensable means of escape, it was the thing that Touya least wanted to see right now. His anguished expression clearly conveyed that.

After a heavy silence, Touya finally spoke, squeezing out the words from between clenched teeth.

"We're going back."

"…Back where?"

"Our base camp, obviously. We can get there quick if we run."

"Eh… What about senpai?"

"Hurry up. Or it'll be too late."

Touya turned on his heels and began to retrace their path, while Homura was dumbfounded as she watched him.

"Why? Why are we going back?"

"We can't afford for the transport to fail in this situation, regardless of how low the chances are. We have to go back to the basement."

"I'm asking what we're going to do about senpai!"

"There's nothing we can do for her by ourselves! We have to go and get help from Koma-senpai and the others!"

In a daze, Homura turned around and looked at the faint footprints that were being gradually washed away by the river at her feet and the slowly drying wolf tracks on top of the rocks.

"…But we don't know where senpai was taken. We can't just leave her alone on this huge planet all by herself."

"The only thing we can do is believe in senpai."

"…No. I can't do that. Senpai was hurt. We have to go rescue her…!"

Touya held back an agitated breath and spoke to Homura as if to admonish her.

"Please understand, Hinooka. You pointed it out to me just now, remember? Inexperienced chicks like us who don't know anything about Nutella or any survival techniques would just get full of ourselves and jump in recklessly, merely increasing the number of victims."

In her head, Homura understood that what Touya said was correct. Even so, Homura wasn't one to back down.

"…Stop acting like senpai!"

Homura struck Touya's chest and let out her anger.

"Do you feel responsible just because you invited me to the Exploration Club? You think you're my guardian? We're the same age! You entered the club just a month before me!"

"Ah? What'd you say?"

Touya glared back at her, but even though she was intimidated, she ignored it and let her feelings explode out.

Homura had always been relying on the serious and diligent Touya and had never been a match for him, but something in her heart was shouting that she couldn't yield and pull back on this matter.

"Touya-kun… aren't you worried about Senpai? If we leave now, when do you think we'll come back?"

"That's… we'll need to call an emergency summons of club members and make preparations for a search… The shortest time would be eight hours. On Earth, that is."

"Forty-eight hours will pass on Nutella during that time! What if it rains? What if the trail is covered up by other animals? We'll no longer be able to find even the few remaining clues to where senpai was taken! And most of all, there's no proof that senpai is safe…!"

Paying no heed to the tears streaming down her cheeks, Homura pleaded to Touya as she pressed her fists, clenched in frustration, against his chest.

"We might not be able to come back to Nutella, right? If we leave, we'll use up all the charged magic energy in this Transport Ring! We'll have to leave the rest to Koma-senpai and the others afterwards. Are you okay with that!?"

"…It can't be helped."

This was hard for Touya too. Homura understood that. But even so.

Wiping away her tears, Homura asked him one more question.

"Touya-kun, if you were alone in this situation, what would you do?"

"……"

"Answer me honestly—"

Touya looked back at Homura with a mortified expression.

Eventually, he sighed and spoke.

"I would chase after senpai. No matter what anyone would tell me afterwards."

Homura smiled and nodded. Their feelings were the same.

"Let's go. As far as we can."

After saying that, Homura picked back up her baggage.

Touya took out the map and scratched his hair.

"If we can't follow their tracks at any point, we're going to do an emergency withdrawal right then and there, okay?"

"Yeah. Of course."

They were well aware that this was a reckless gamble.

First, the two of them sorted through their baggage and kept only the bare minimum in necessary equipment.

They had no idea how many rough spots they would encounter during their pursuit. Since they were inexperienced with Nutella's natural environment, they prioritized tools for aiding in climbing or going through marshland in order to avoid as much danger as possible.

Their food supplies consisted of twelve meals' worth of food divided between the two of them. It was originally a single person's portion for this mission. From what they knew of wolves, this amount was nowhere near enough to compensate for the wolves' range of actions. Even if the preserved food was made compact and portable, it still took up a majority of their baggage space.

It was implicitly agreed between them that this would be their food supplies for a one-way trip. If they greatly lost sight of their target during pursuit, it would be difficult to stay here any further timewise.

The birds also seemed noisy in the direction through the forest that the pack of wolves had passed through.

"Wouldn't things be easier if we had transmitters or a radar?"

"But we don't. And no talking from here on out."

"……"

Homura responded by closing her mouth with a "hmph" and straining her ears with an exaggerated gesture.

The two of them focused their senses as they began to proceed through the forest at a jogging pace.

Many clear traces of the large wolves passing through were left behind, more than they'd expected.

Not only were there footprints carved into the soft soil of the forest, there were also traces like snapped branches and distinct tuffs of grey fur visible. Even poop sometimes.

Though they lost sight of the tracks when they cut off at several points, they always managed to find new traces each time, seeming to cultivate their vague instincts for finding which paths the wolves like as they did so.

In particular, Touya demonstrated an extraordinary sense of smell and saw through trackless paths one after another, impressing Homura.

Within a high thicket that made it impossible to see ahead with human sight, they passed through an animal path that acted like a tunnel and crossed a gorge between cliffs that would make any human hesitate, and they finally found new wolf traces again on the other side.

"Amazing, Touya-kun. You always find their tracks every time. Do you know senpai's scent? Are you a police dog? A Doberman-Man?"

"Hey now…"

While putting his canteen to his mouth, Touya wiped his sweat.

"They probably don't think that we're chasing after them."

"In that case, we have a chance."

"I wonder about that."

In other words, they had that much confidence in their running speed.

Touya looked at the path ahead anxiously.

"They're getting further and further away…"

At first, the tracks had seemed to be heading southwest, but then they had suddenly switched to southeast. After that, they had turned straight east, apparently taking a path with few rises or falls that generally weaved through the fringes of hills.

The wolves continued to move without resting. The two of them could vaguely guess where they were heading. They hadn't mentioned it out loud, as they despaired it might lead to the worst possible course.

The wolves seemed to be heading towards the unexplored area which wasn't mapped.

The northern hills finally turned into mountain ridges, towering high above with snow-covered tall peaks.

During Homura's first mission, they had taken a wide detour around the mountain ranges that surrounding the unexplored area on either side, planning to instead proceed from the south. It was a much longer detour than through the east, but the mountains that appeared along the path that way were lower in height.

And then—

The two of them had miraculously managed to follow the tracks of the wolves, but they finally lost sight of any traces. They looked around everywhere in the woods around them for around an hour, but they couldn't find the wolves' path.

Not only Homura, but even Touya wasn't confident at what route to take next. The fact that they were practically at the edge of the territory that the map covered further fanned their anxiousness.

At the foot of the mountain range that towered ominously to the north, they found animal footprints.

"These aren't from wolves…"

Touya shook his head despondently.

"These are broken hoof prints. They're probably from some species of deer or mountain ox."

The footprints seemed to head in the direction of the mountain range.

"Did they run away because the wolves came? In that case—"

Touya couldn't think so optimistically like Homura.

"I don't think so, but I'm an amateur anyway. What should we do? Should we go back and try looking around again?"

"…Go forward or back, huh?"

Or they could do an emergency withdrawal here—

If they continued forward, they would be stepping straight into the unexplored area, and in the middle of clearly treacherous mountains at that.

Until now, they had barely been able to keep track of their location through the map and the markings left behind by Exploration Club members on the mountain ridge, but they would lose those assurances after this.

"Is it all right if I decide…? You won't hold a grudge no matter what?"

"Yeah. I'm going to bet on your good luck, Hinooka."

Touya nodded with a humble face.

That made Homura fired up at first, but then she suddenly tilted her head in confusion.

"Ah, you're not relying on my actual judgement then?"

In the end, Homura made the reckless choice to keep going as far as they could, and in accordance, the two of them groped their way through the mountains. They found hoof tracks every once in a while, but they weren't very reliable as clues.

After they crossed over a small stream and ascended further, they finally broke out of the trees and arrived at an area with broken crags scattered everywhere, apparently having lain there for a long time.

A scree slope filled with shattered fragments of white stone served as footing, and they couldn't see anything like footprints anywhere.

Touya calmly looked up at the bare surface of the mountain and pointed a finger.

The sources of the footprints they'd seen were striding over the precipitous rock surface as if clinging to it.

"—Those aren't deer. Are they goats?"

"Probably, based on those horns. Where are they headed…?"

Ten-odd shaggy goats were jumping up the rock wall that was completely impassable for Homura and Touya. Their regrown fur looked like a patchwork of different shades.

"There aren't any meadows further up there… are they headed to a watering hole or something up there…?"

"We passed tons of streams just a little while ago."

"Yeah, that's true."

While cocking her head in puzzlement, Homura took a step towards the slope.

Touya hurriedly came up next to Homura.

"Hey, are you actually planning on climbing this?"

"Doesn't it bother you too? Maybe there's a secret path up that way?"

Touya was completely reluctant, but on the other hand, he couldn't refute that argument, so he took out a rope and prepared for the worst.

They ascended the pathless scree slope that was piled far and wide beneath the steep rock face.

As Touya went ahead, pebbles rolled out from under his feet and struck against Homura countless times.

She wanted to complain about it, but on the other hand, she didn't have the confidence that she could stand ahead and cut their path through while being cautious of their surroundings and watching her footing.

"……?"

Just when she thought another pebble had fallen towards her, she felt something out of place and carefully stared at the fallen object.

She took a few steps forward to approach the object that had stopped along the gentle gravel slope.

The slope over there was even and easy to walk on, making Homura wonder why both Touya and the goats earlier had chosen to walk on this rough slope.

—Homura's left leg sank down to the ankle in the slope without any resistance.

She frantically tried to pull her foot back up and braced her right leg, but then that one sank down to the knee as well.

She lost her balance and put her hand on the ground behind her to crouch there, but it too sank down.

The more she struggled to get out, the more she was sucked into the scree slope.

"……"

Homura stiffened in place on her hands and legs with her face pointed upwards, as if she were playing Twister.

Cold sweat ran down her back as she saw Touya getting further and further away at the edge of her vision.

Was it her imagination that there were raptor-like shadows flying in the sky above her?

"T-Touya-saaa~n."

"What? Don't say my name so creepily."

"Umm. I thought going this way… would be easier, but…"

When Touya turned around at the sound of Homura's weak voice, his expression stiffened for an instant, but after a few seconds, he burst out laughing.

"Buhaha… Yeah, you definitely slipped[1] there."

"Hey, it's cruel to laugh."

"Sorry. I'll take out some rope right now, so be patient."

After approaching cautiously, Touya fixed the rope to a sturdy rock right behind Homura, and then threw the end of the double-looped rope towards Homura.

"Can you pick it up? If you can't, I'll come over."

"No… There's no need… There we go."

By twisting her body, she sunk down to her waist, but she still somehow managed to grab hold of the rope.

Homura stopped Touya when he tried to pull her up, and instead slid her body horizontally through the ground by using the rope as leverage.

"Hey, what are you trying to do? If you play around, you'll seriously be in danger, you know?"

"Sorry… Just another ten centimeters…"

She stretched out her hand with all her might and managed to grab the fallen object from earlier.

Soon after, Homura was pulled out of the drift of gravel.

The item that she'd first mistaken for a dried leaf was in fact a small square piece of paper. And when Homura sniffed it, she could tell that there was a faint sweet scent lingering on it.

She thrust the paper in front of Touya's nose right after he'd finished carefully repacking the rope.

"Touya-kun, look! Look at this!"

"……?"

Though he made a dubious face at first, Touya also soon noticed the paper's true identity.

"….This… is taffy wrapper from our snack supplies…!"

"Yeah, it's from a piece of candy! That girl and the wolves must have passed through here! Right!?"

If this were a well-traveled area, it would be weak as proof, but there was no mistake in this situation.

Most likely, that wolf girl had eaten a piece of candy and thrown away the wrapper here. An Exploration Club member would never carelessly throw garbage on the ground in the first place.

Touya widened his eyes, impressed.

"Amazing… Hinooka, you're seriously amazing. I would never have noticed this."

"Fufufu. Now that we know where they're headed, let's keep going, Touya-kun."

"All right, let's go. Don't wander off anywhere strange anymore."

"I get it already."

Though they climbed the slope with no destination in mind, the two of them suddenly regained their vitality.

After carefully climbing the scree slope, which became rapidly steeper halfway up, they arrived at a small level plain that seemed to have been made either from the mountain slope cracking in half for some reason or from a landslide.

The first thing they saw there was the goat herd from earlier.

"……Ah…!"

And when they saw another silhouette there further back, the two of them stiffened in shock.

It was a bear.

It was a black, adult male bear with a crescent-shaped white spot on its chest.

The herbivorous goats and the carnivorous bear were standing some distance from each other as they all faced the basin that lay along the rock surface. There were puddles of water here and there on the ground; it appeared that spring water was seeping out from the cracks in the rocks.

"……"

Homura extended a hand towards her tear gas spray while gulping loudly.

The spray was a tool she hadn't used before, since she'd unfortunately hadn't had it on hand during the wolves' attack earlier.

"…There's basically no escape route in a narrow and confined place like this."

Touya murmured in a stifled voice.

Touya had also unconsciously moved his hands to his sword hilts.

Not knowing what to do, Homura could only hide behind Touya's back.

However, when the bear raised its head and turned towards them, it only stared at them for a brief time before turning to leave the watering hole.

"I-Is it coming at us…?"

Homura unconsciously put strength into her fingers which were grasping Touya's shoulders.

However, the bear didn't show any further interest and calmly passed them by right in front of their eyes. It came so close that they could even detect its body odor, which was distinctly different from the wolves'.

After watching as the bear almost seemed to hop its way down the scree slope, Homura sank down to the ground where she stood.

Even as she lay there dazed, Touya crouched down next to the watering hole and inspected it.

Somehow managing to calm her heart down while listening to the tranquil bleating of the goats, Homura followed after Touya.

"Did that bear come here to drink water…?"

"……*slurp*."

Touya scooped up some water from a blackened puddle and put it in his mouth, then frowned.

"…It isn't spring water?"

"It's definitely spring water, but this isn't drinkable."

Homura put a finger in the cold puddle and licked it to taste it herself.

"Ugh… so pungent. It's so bitter… or rather, it tastes metallic…"

"This is salt water."

When they looked closely, recrystallized lumps of salt were scattered around the watering hole, and the goats seemed to be licking them.

"Most likely, there's a layer of rock salt nearby, and the thawed water which passes through it drips out here."

"Ooh. Then, the animals came here for that—"

In other words, it was a natural field for drying salt.

When considered that way, these seemingly insignificant puddles of water looked like holy grounds instead.

"If there's rock salt, that means this place used to be covered by sea, right?"

"Yeah. If we investigated around here carefully, we might even find fossils."

"Fossils, huh… If I remember correctly, the Exploration Club hasn't found any fossils yet, right?"

"Yeah, so it seems."

Homura suddenly became eager from the thought of digging up ammonites.

Frantically shaking her head, she lowered her head and began searching around the watering hole for traces of the wolves passing by.

"……"

As Touya went to stand at the edge of the cliff they had climbed, he looked anxiously up at the sky, which had started to cloud over.

The two of them managed to find something barely like a path beyond the rock salt watering hole as well and continued forward.

The rock face covered in piles of crags continued unchangingly.

When they arrived at a ridge with a good view, Touya spotted the silhouettes of animals running along the spine of the mountain ridge, though only for a brief instant. There was no proof that those were the wolves.

On the other hand, fog gradually enshrouded the base of the mountain and worsened their vision as they tried to catch up.

The wind also picked up, and Homura was surprised at the coldness of her hands and feet, which had become completely chilled without her realizing it.

Coupled with her fatigue, the cold stiffened Homura's movements and she slipped and fell on the rocks several times.

Touya searched for a place to avoid the continuously blowing high wind without fear of falling rocks, but he couldn't find a good place to rest.

Keeping his feelings of impatience in check, he waited for Homura to catch up.

"Are your legs okay?"

"I'm fine. Besides, we can't make a bivouac in such an open and defenseless place, right?"

"Yeah, but…"

Touya peered at her face worriedly, but Homura did her best to bluff it off and smile.

"Aren't your lips turning blue? Try putting something in your mouth. Here, take some candy."

"Yeah, thanks."

The sun had almost completely sunk on the horizon and the glow of the Bagel ruled the sky.

Though it had seemed so beautiful on their previous mission, now the Bagel looked solemn and frightening to Homura.

Even that great celestial ring was being covered over by dark blue clouds.

"……"

Touya's expression darkened as he looked up at the sky.

He couldn't say "Just a little bit more" at this point.

There was no guarantee that they'd be able to get out of this rocky area in time.

And if they slowed down, senpai would get that much further away. Homura also understood that and seemed to swallow back all the complaints that rose up her throat many times.

"Ah."

The dimly-conscious Homura almost barreled straight into Touya, who had stopped to wait for her ahead.

"Are we going to set up a tent here?"

"Hinooka, I promised to let you ride behind me before, remember?"

"…Eh?"

Touya grinned and turned around his sack so that he now carried it in front of him, with his back facing Homura.

"Yeah, but we don't have a bicycle with us right now, you know?"

"Just hop on already. It's fine."

Touya crouched down and waited for Homura to climb on his back.

"No one's here to see anyway. Don't worry about it, come on."

"…But you're here, Touya-kun…"

"Think of me as an amusement park ride or something."

Though she was still hesitant, Homura was pressured by Touya's expression and finally put her hands on his shoulders.

Touya easily lifted her up on his back and immediately began walking.

"Hyah!"

"Sorry. You were lighter than I thought."

"Yes, yes, flatter me all you want."

Homura's cheeks were slightly red, but she was the only one aware of that.

"If I'm about to stumble, I might take away my hands from supporting your legs, so make sure to firmly hold onto my neck."

Doing as she was told, Homura leaned on Touya with her arms around his neck.

Even without that, her fatigue had come to weigh heavily on her, making it hard to keep bracing herself.

They proceeded across the rockface, relying only on the dim light from the overcast sky.

Without hurrying in a panic, Touya moved forward at a firm and steady pace.

Eventually, a light drizzle began to fall.

Though the passing shower was weak, the wind felt all the chillier as a result.

"Are you cold?"

Homura silently shook her head. In truth, Touya's back actually felt warm to her.

"I'm literally excess baggage right now…"

"Haha, that's true. You know how to hit where it hurts, huh?"

"Can't we use some illumination magic?"

"I'm more afraid of the opposite right now. My eyes have already gotten used to the dark."

"……"

As Touya sought a path through the crags while paying care to falling rocks and crevices, Homura couldn't just talk casually to him in this situation.

Homura dozed off to the regular swaying of Touya's back.

The incessant sound of wind. Touya's rhythmic breathing. The cold drops hitting the nape of her neck.

She was worried about the clues to senpai's whereabouts being washed away by the rain.

A heart that never falters—

She absentmindedly recalled senpai's words.

In the end, courage and recklessness are the same thing, right?

If things turn out all right in the end, it's courage. If it ends in failure, people say "I told you so" and call it recklessness.

Right now, there were only their hearts. Their hearts which were trying to keep moving forward.

When she woke up from her doze, Homura was sitting down against the rock wall.

She had a towel around her neck. The feeling of having had her wet hair wiped still faintly remained on her head.

"Ah…"

When she looked up, she saw Touya removing conspicuous stones from the gravel-filled ground while keeping an illumination spell lit over his shoulder.

They were in a big horizontal depression where comparatively soft bedrock along the mountain's surface had been carved out, and though it wasn't deep enough to be called a cave, it was sufficient to keep out the rain and wind.

"…You found a nice place."

"And you slept quite deeply. If you're awake, come and help me."

She felt like she had been swaying on his back for over an hour. She hadn't noticed when she was put down at all.

Her clothes were made to be quite water-repellant, so they were only slightly wet even after being drenched in the rain.

"Are we going to make a tent?"

"We can't resume walking until it brightens anyway. We can only sleep for now."

Encouraging her sluggish body, Homura stood up.

Though, even if Touya told her to help secure their sleeping area, the only preparations they needed to do was set up a bivouac and their sleeping bags. The shelter consisted of a small, light-weight tent suited to carrying. They firmly set up the poles and ropes so that it wouldn't be beaten by the strong wind that occasionally blew through.

After finishing its construction and silently eating their meal, the two of them slipped into their sleeping bags without hesitation due to the chill of the wind.

Understandably, it was quite cramped with two sleeping bags lying next to each other in a small tent. Even so, Homura didn't complain. It had been hard work just to set up this much.

As Touya lay sideways on his right shoulder, Homura couldn't stop squirming restlessly next to his back.

"My back is itchy… The ground is too uneven…"

"…You're the one who placed the mat straight on the ground because you said it was too bulky and unwieldy, Hinooka."

"I can't sleep like this…"

"It might be a bit better if you spread out your jacket underneath you."

"I don't want to make it all wrinkly…"

After stubbornly continuing to stir in her sleeping back, Homura finally did as Touya said and managed to find a barely comfortable posture.

The faint nighttime illumination pierced through the thin tent cloth.

They heard the sound of the incessant wind through the ventilation hole at the top of the tent, and raindrops struck the tent whenever the wind strengthened every once in a while.

"…I feel like I'm in the middle of a painful dream."

Homura murmured as she listened to the sound of the wind.

"Just go to sleep."

"…Yeah."

But even if she was told that—

Partially because she had slept a bit earlier while she was being carried, she couldn't seem to fall asleep now. Though she understood that these were emergency circumstances, she couldn't help being conscious of the audacious situation they were in.

Feeling bored, Homura grasped her hands together within her sleeping bag and traced the ring she still wasn't accustomed to wearing on her finger.

Homura had viewed the ring annoyingly when she had whined and wanted to go back during their first mission, but now it was their only lifeline.

"Did senpai drop the Transport Ring on purpose?"

Homura tilted her head and asked that over her shoulder, and Touya reluctantly replied.

"…Of course not. If she had regained consciousness enough to do that, she could have done an emergency withdrawal, or she could have run away while the wolves weren't looking without using the ring."

"Hmm~… That might be the most logical conclusion, but considering senpai's personality, I don't think she'd escape back home by herself."

"…Well, I agree with you there."

"Maybe the wolf girl threw it away to prevent senpai from escaping?"

"You think she figured out the ring's functions on first glance? Rather, wouldn't she want an accessory like the ring for herself? Like those hair ornaments she wore. The issue is who would have told her about the ring…"

"Yeah, that is strange."

Homura nodded in agreement on that point. But she still wasn't convinced.

"……"

Touya was calm and tenacious, and always thought one step further than Homura. Homura couldn't think of any other boy who would be able to act this calmly in the same situation. Well, he was a bit inflexible too, though.

Before this long day ends, I should say at least one word of thanks—

But even though she thought that, no words of gratitude came out.

Instead, she felt like pointing out his faults, against her better judgement.

"Hey, Touya-kun… Have you been sticking with me because I'm a member of the Exploration Club?"

After a long silence that made Homura think he'd fallen asleep, Touya responded in a sleepy voice.

"You really like asking the obvious, don't you?"

That blunt answer was just like him. It made Homura all the more irritated.

"…It's not obvious."

She protested as she hit his back through the sleeping bags.

"Ouch… Don't act violent. It's cramped here."

"That's just a result of coincidence. I just happened to have IE aptitude, and I just happened to not be part of any club."

"Is there something wrong with it being due to coincidence?"

"Yes."

"Just go to sleep already."

"If I quit the Exploration Club, would I be just a stranger to you?"

"Why would that be?"

Touya turned around irritated, but Homura ended up right in front of him since she'd been watching him from unexpectedly close proximity.

"Uoh."

"……"

Though the two of them glared at each other briefly, Touya soon burst out in laughter at Homura's pouting face. He returned to his original sleeping position and tried to hold back his chuckling.

"Don't laugh at me~"

"I already fully understand just how funny and interesting a person you are."

"I don't like leaving it halfway and vague like that between us."

"Ah? So what? You want something more stereotypical? Then just think of us as close buds."

"Close buds… you mean friends?"

"Yeah. Close friends."

"……"

"You're a close, troublesome friend to me."

"……"

Homura's fist silently hit the back of Touya's head.

"Hey, that hurts… If it being due to coincidence is bad, then would you feel relieved if it's assured by someone? Almost everything in the world is decided through coincidence. The only things we can decide for ourselves are the things within our reach."

The things within one's reach. While thinking of the distance that separated her from her home on Earth, Homura touched her finger to the charm hanging from her neck.

"…Was the reason you came to like senpai also due to coincidence?"

"Man, you're really persistent. I'm quite sleepy here, you know?"

"Senpai is beautiful, kind and accomplished both academically and in martial arts; I guess it's only natural you would come to like her. Right, Touya-kun?"

"Why are you asking me that, idiot?"

"Tell me. Was it love at first sight?"

Touya let out an intentionally exasperated sigh that resounded through the tent.

"I'll tell you. But only after you, senpai and I all make it back to Earth."

"Hmph… That's a bet with some long odds…"

"Yeah, yeah. It goes without saying, but it's going to be pretty rough tomorrow. Prepare yourself."

"It'll be fine."

"That mysterious confidence of yours again?"

"It'll be fine… It's okay to be lost and take a detour. Just like as long as you take the Oedo Line[2]… you'll eventually reach your destination even if you take a detour."

"…I see. Yeah, that's true."

"……"

Inside his sleeping bag, Touya suddenly tilted his head in puzzlement.

"…Ah? Hey, the Oedo Line isn't actually a loop subway line. Wouldn't the Yamanote Line be a better example? You won't reach your destination if you just vaguely hop onto the Oedo Line, you know?"

"……"

Homura didn't reply, returning only slumbering breathing.

Though a bit bemused, Touya turned to sleep himself while praying for the rain to stop.

That night, Homura dreamed.

She completely forgot what kind of dream it was when she woke up, though.

Chapter 17 END

1 This is actually part of a Japanese pun using different Kanji readings that can't be properly translated in English. Right before this, Homura says "easier" (raku), and Touya plays on it by saying she "slipped/fell", which can also be read as "raku".

2 Oedo Line: An underground subway line that runs in a loop around central Tokyo before branching out towards the western suburbs, making the line look like a "6" lying on its side.

Chapter 18

"This is no good."

"We're lost. Completely."

The next morning.

Luckily, the rain had stopped, but the two of them had been wandering through marshy grasslands for several hours now. They had lost more precious time here than anywhere else. Just when they thought they had gotten out of that bleak rocky area with its lingering snow, they found a huge expanse of wetlands beyond it.

They couldn't see anything like a path anymore. Though their stamina had recovered after a night's rest, impatience filled the forefront of their minds.

The two of them searched for a path out of this place while wading knee-deep in the mud.

The landscape, a mix of black mud and sponge-like grassland, didn't seem like a terrain that the wolves would like at all.

As she quickly got tired of having her feet catch on aquatic plants, getting drenched in mud and freezing in place at the sight of a salamander the size of a large dog, Homura grumbled out loud.

"Wasn't there supposed to be a lake in the unexplored area?"

Touya replied as he walked while measuring the water depth with a stick.

"Calling these wetlands that extend as far as the eye can see a lake—Mori-chan's briefing really was a bit *lake-adaisical*[1]."

"…All right, try saying something a bit funnier, at least."

Homura followed behind Touya while carefully wading her legs through the marsh.

After having tripped and pitched face forward once, she had resigned herself and picked up a stick to help her.

"Ah, even if you say that, I'm feeling really *swamped* right now."

"If Tsuyu were here, she'd punch you."

"What a harsh critic."

Touya sometimes stopped and jotted down notes on the map, but he had no experience in mapping, so he was doing it based mostly on guesswork. Even if he had a wide field of vision, there was nowhere high up with a broad view within the wetlands, and the bird-like small trees that dotted the area made it hard to get an unobstructed view.

Meanwhile, Homura took out the analog camera, the most experience and burdensome item among her belongings on hand, and took pictures of the surrounding scenery. Her plan was to capture the Bagel in the sky and the distinctive mountains with the same angle and use the pictures as material to help deduce the terrain here.

However, that only lasted until fog started to enshroud the area.

Water birds swam beside Homura and Touya on the water surface along with their young offspring. It was a sight that seemed to completely change their feelings of impatience.

Homura couldn't help getting very irritated at her submerged shoes and the coldness of the snow-thawed water which numbed her toes.

"I want to go to a spa resort and eat sweets…"

"That's quite an escape from reality."

"Coffee milk at the Benten Hot Springs would also be great…"

"No, Benten is a public bath house. How about you wipe your face? It's pitch-black."

Touya held out his canteen, which brightened up Homura.

"Is it all right…? Isn't this our precious drinking water?"

"The water around here seems quite clean. There's probably a source of spring water nearby."

"Though it's quite muddy in exchange."

"That's because of the rain. It'll become clear after a while, and we can use a water filter too. Even the water in this canteen came from the river we passed yesterday."

"In that case, I can wait to wash up a little longer until we find some water."

Touya nodded in agreement.

As they advanced further into the woods to find better footing while avoiding the places where the marsh became deeper, they eventually lost their way in the depths of the wetlands.

After cutting back and changing their path several times, the two of them came to a standstill on something like a peninsula that protruded from the marsh.

Snow-thawed water gently flowed through the field of water that didn't qualify as either a river or a lake. The marsh's depths exceeded two meters everywhere, making it impossible to get good footing.

While surveying the water surface and the reeds that swayed within it, the two of them stood there, stupefied and lost for words.

"……"

They finally had to accept the conclusion they had been trying to avoid—the fact that, as expected, the wolves had likely taken a wide detour around these wetlands to reach the other side.

Even for wolves, it wouldn't have been easy to march through the chilly rain at night. Animals usually stayed put during bad weather, and all the more so when carrying someone injured like senpai. Touya had desperately hoped that they could still catch up if they could somehow find any traces of where they camped out, but…

With no option left, Touya gritted his teeth at the frustration that rose up within him.

"Is this as far as we go…?"

Touya gripped a reed stalk and hung his head.

"Damn it… am I going to fail to do anything again…?"

Despondent tears gathered at the corners of his eyes.

The shining ripples they made on the water spread out into the distance and faded into the streaming fog.

Homura could only painfully watch Touya's back on the shore as she was crushed by her own sense of helplessness.

"……"

Touya stuck his stick in the water and began searching for a path again, stubbornly not willing to give up.

However…

"Hyah, uu, wah, wah."

He heard Homura's frenzied voice behind him.

"T-T-Touya-saaaan!"

"What is it? Did a pink platypus appear this time—uwah!"

When he turned in the direction Homura's disgraceful voice, Touya almost fell over in shock.

Homura, who had stepped onto a floating mass of reeds slightly, was now being carried away from the peninsula's shore.

"What the heck are you doing!?"

"I was wondering what to shout when I started drifting away…"

"Shout for help, obviously!"

"He… Help… D-Do you have rope?"

The twig that should have been in her hand was now floating on the water and drifting away from her.

The floating mass of reeds, captured by the flow of an unseen stream, gradually picked up speed.

"Touya-ku… hii…!"

When Homura tried stepping forward, the floating mass of reeds shook and tilted beneath her feet.

"Crouch down! Don't stand up!"

While following Homura with his eyes, Touya searched through his sack and headed for the tip of the little island he stood on.

"This is seriously bad… I won't make it in time."

Unable to immediately find something to use in place of a buoy, he had no choice but to tie his multi-tool to the end of his rope and then he threw it with all his strength.

However, the end of the rope hit the water a distance away from the floating mass of reeds and began to sink down.

The rope was out of Homura's reach even if she stretched out her arm and fingers.

"I can't reach it!"

"Damn it, no good, huh… Listen, Hinooka! Stay there!"

Shouting that, Touya threw his baggage down on the shore and jumped into the huge river of the marsh.

While clinging to the unstable floating mass of reeds, Homura tried to peer into the water.

Touya's face briefly surfaced, but suddenly disappeared from her sight during the short time when the floating mass of reeds spun as it moved.

"Touya-kun…? …Touya-kun!?"

She hurriedly swivelled her head and searched for her partner, who showed no indication of surfacing.

"No way… No… Touya-kuuuuuuuuuun!"

Homura shouted in a trembling voice while leaning forward to peer into the water.

"Yaa…"

The roots of the floating mass of reeds she was gripping onto came apart, causing Homura to plunge headfirst into the water.

The strong currents, which acted like the wetlands' arteries, pulled on Homura's body and tried to drag her away.

The chill of the water made her chest tighten and quickly robbed her limbs' freedom of movement.

Homura grappled with her own hair, which stuck to her face, and desperately tried to search for the surface in the water where she couldn't tell up from down—

And then, she felt arms wrap around her back.

She felt the recoil of the person who held her kicking off the ground at the bottom of the water, and her face quickly breached the surface.

"Idiot, don't jump in!"

"*cough*—But…"

As Touya supported her from behind, Homura repeatedly sank into the water and kicked off the bottom to surface, until they finally managed to catch up to the floating mass of reeds.

Touya helped push Homura up onto the floating mass, and then he clung to the roots of the reeds in the water.

While dripping water from her body and breathing heavily, Homura stood up and reached a hand out to Touya.

"Touya-kun, here—"

Touya took her hand and tried to climb onto the floating mass, but then he stiffened and stopped.

When he put his weight on it, the floating mass of reeds began to sink. Homura was startled when she saw the water suddenly rise up to her knees again.

"It's no good. I'll move it over to the shore bank like this."

As he spoke and lifted his shoulders out from the water, Touya's lips were becoming increasingly blue.

Soaked and trembling herself, Homura shook her head.

"No, it's too cold in the water. You'll die."

"I won't die—Could you take these from me at least…?"

Touya plunged his arms back into the water and brought out his specialized weapons.

"Your swords!? You kept hold of them!?"

"Of course. Though, they were heavy, admittedly. I wasn't able to swim well because of them."

Touya smiled mischievously.

"Are you stupid? You really are a sword fanatic—"

"Shut up."

Smiling while crying, Homura picked up the swords from Touya and then gripped his ice-cold fingers.

The floating mass of reeds flowed along the water at a fixed speed. The shore they were originally at became smaller and smaller in the distance as the fog shrouded over it.

"Your baggage…"

"We'll have to give up on warm meals. Yours is all we have left."

Touya pointed at Homura's sack lying next to the drenched longsword beside her leg. Besides her camera, there was only a single sleeping bag and the barest of truly essential items inside the sack. They didn't even have the map anymore.

"I'll act as a motor and push it, so you direct it towards the shore."

Though Touya's voice trembled, he still spoke as brightly as he could.

"Yeah."

Homura stood up half-risen on the floating mass of reeds.

No matter how hard she looked around, the only things she could see were the fog and clusters of reeds protruding from the water; the shore bank was nowhere in sight. She couldn't catch sight of it even on top of this huge mass of reeds.

Touya's body temperature was draining away while she hesitated. The water temperature wasn't even 10 degrees Celsius. It was as cold as a winter morning.

"Which way, for the time being?"

"…Uh… T-That way?"

"All right. Keep pointing out directions to me like that."

Just as if he were using a swimming board, Touya began to vigorously paddle his legs.

The floating mass of reeds gradually deviated from the stream's main current.

While her chest felt like it was about to burst open from anxiety, Homura desperately continued to search for the shore.

"…Hey, wasn't there a scene like this in a movie…? That luxury passenger boat one."

"Haha… are you trying to kill me here… *cough*… *cough*…"

Homura bit her lip at the sound of Touya's choked breathing.

Wrought by impatience, she could only curse the time calmly flowing by. She gripped her drenched charm.

After paddling and aimlessly drifting through the water like that for over ten minutes—

Homura felt a strange discomfiture in her chest that was different from her feeling of impatience.

She turned her head around as if guided by something, and she felt like she saw a small sunlit shore amidst the fog.

"……"

It might have been an illusion. But Homura immediately followed her instincts.

"Touya-kun, that way! Turn left, towards 10 o'clock!"

"…You said turn right a minute ago."

"Just do it!"

They changed course and continued on.

Meanwhile, the mass of reeds began to lose its buoyancy and gradually began to sink into the water.

—Eventually, the fog drifted away, and the shore appeared faintly in front of them.

What Homura had thought was sunlight were in fact yellow flowers blooming across the shore.

"Shore… It's shore, Touya-kun!"

"……"

The dimly conscious Touya didn't respond, with only the sound of his weak paddling to be heard.

Homura picked up his long sword and stuck it into the water, and she desperately began to row with it like on a ferryboat.

"…Hey, don't use my weapon as an oar."

"Shut up!"

Thanks to Homura's vigorous rowing, the unstable mass of reeds began to collapse even further.

Touya mustered the last of his strength and put it into his feet as well.

"We're sinking! Row… Row!"

Just when the floating mass of reeds came apart and Homura and Touya were thrown back into the water, they were already within walking distance of the shore.

"We made it! It's shore! It's solid ground!"

"……"

Touya's voice was too hoarse to form a proper response.

Seeing that, Homura quickly moved.

Lending a shoulder to Touya as he lay there ghastly pale, Homura carried him up to the rockface further up from the shore and sat him down. She gathered dry leaves to use in place of a towel and stuffed them under his clothes to suck out the water. She took out her sleeping bag from her sack, which had just barely avoided being submerged in the water, and put it over Touya's shoulders to wrap him up.

"Pull yourself together, Touya-kun. I'm going to light a fire right now."

"…You're going to use smoke magic…?"

"Die! Freeze to death!"

After she used their emergency matches without hesitation to light a fire, Touya started shivering again.

After that, Homura could finally sit in front of the fire as well and raise her hands to it, and she could now tell how much her body had been chilled.

She took off her shoes and socks to become barefoot, and dried them in front of the fire.

While gazing at the yellow flowers, Touya murmured.

"I've seen these flowers before… But I don't think they're suited to such high wetlands, if I remember right…"

"…Now that you mention it..."

Homura also tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Aren't these flowers that grow in paddy fields?"

"Yeah, that's right. These are the kinds of flowers you see in unplowed fields."

Touya put the sleeping bag down next to him and stood up, looking carefully at the rockface he had been sitting on.

"—This is a stone wall."

"Eh?"

"A highway…? No, the remains of a cultivated field?"

It wasn't just a natural rockface. The arranged stones were crumbling away and covered in moss, but it was definitely something assembled by human hands.

Homura and Touya were standing on one end of a stone wall that encircled the shore bank.

Homura surveyed their surroundings as she stood barefoot on the stone.

"……Mumu…"

As the fog gradually thinned out, she caught glimpses of the white line of the stone wall amidst the thicket of blooming yellow flowers.

"How does it look?"

"It seems to continue all the way to the other side."

"Bingo, huh—fuah, ah, achoo!"

After drying themselves sufficiently, the two of them packed up their now decreased baggage and left the shore.

Unlike their previous vague search, the remains of the stone wall clearly showed them a direction to travel in.

They regained confidence in their footsteps.

The two of them didn't even need to mention out loud between each other the probability that such clear remains of civilization implicitly might lead them to the den of that girl with the wolves—to a community of Nutellans.

Their surroundings continued to consist of wetlands, but trees started to stand out more and more as they followed the stone wall. The stone wall and the roots of the trees seemed to be keeping the soil of the field in check.

The sky cleared up and the temperature gradually rose, making it possible to see their surroundings better.

The sunlight illuminated a vibrant green shore and clumps of fog drifted over the ground like small clouds, the exact kind of scene that Homura would want to put as the background image on her cell phone.

"That was really dangerous, earlier."

Homura said that as she poked Touya's shoulder in front of her, and Touya nodded.

"…You didn't mention doing an emergency withdrawal," Homura added.

"Yeah. Sorry, for forcing this on you."

Homura shook her head.

"I'm quite fine and lively now. It was all because I blundered in the first place."

"Don't worry about it. As Mori-chan would put it, it was all right in the end."

"My stomach is hungry now, though."

"Why am I not surprised?"

As Touya laughed, Homura asked another question in a slightly meek manner.

"…What would you have done if I had said we should do an emergency withdrawal right away back then?"

"Haha, another what-if? Sorry, but I would have refused."

"I thought so."

"I can't return without getting any clue to senpai's whereabouts."

Homura felt the same way.

However, in the worst case scenario, Touya would have probably made Homura return by herself.

Even if he didn't do that, they had virtually no food left. The few pieces of candy they had left had been divided between them and eaten during their rest earlier.

Touya, who was now lightly equipped without his baggage, showed no signs of caring about it and walked casually in front of Homura.

He suddenly started talking while facing straight ahead.

"You were right. I fell for senpai at first sight."

"Eh?"

It was the topic that Touya had said he would talk about when all three of them returned to Earth in the tent last night.

"I instinctively felt that senpai was special. It's that simple. That's the kind of guy I am."

"…Was it at the school entrance ceremony?"

"A little before that. It was during the autumn of last year. When I went to Seiran on a school visit, I met senpai for the first time while she was helping the student council president Rokujizou and acting as a guide for us."

"Hmm."

Homura trotted over to walk beside Touya.

"Seiran's entrance exam was a bit hard for me academically, though I would have gotten in safely thanks to the sports recommendation I received. When I visited the school, I didn't like the atmosphere of Seiran's Kendo Club and wasn't that interested in entering Seiran. I thought it'd be fine if I went to another school."

"But you decided on Seiran…?"

"I was interested in senpai."

"That's all? That's the reason you rejected your recommendation and went out of your way to pass the entrance exam with your own ability?"

"You're quite well informed."

True, he couldn't have used the sports recommendation to get in and then not join any sports club.

"…Senpai was still in her second year and not the club president yet, right? What was she like then?"

"Let me see… She was a bit… no, completely unsuited to act as a guide. You know how she is normally, right? But she still explained things enthusiastically. She even passionately explained the details of the Kendo Club that I had disinterestedly come to see, as if it were her own club. I could tell that she really loved this school. All the others who came on the school visit with me probably thought the same thing."

"I see… I only went to the school for the first time on the day of the entrance exam, myself."

"So you jumped in without prior preparation, huh? That's just like you, Hinooka."

"Grrr. Anyway, what happened next?"

"…So, I searched for and found senpai one more time before we left, and asked her what club she was in."

"So indecent."

"Kuh… I couldn't help it, I was interested in her."

Touya's face clouded over.

"Of course, she was a member of the Exploration Club. But back then, she didn't guide us to the club building. Because apparently, the club itself might have suspended its activities next year."

"Eh, it might have? You mean the club really was in danger of being disbanded!?"

"Not disbanded, suspended. A temporary pause in activities. As if it could simply be disbanded with such a big building and so much equipment. However, since there was only one club member, the Exploration Club couldn't remain active."

Homura nodded in understanding.

Homura had already painfully come to understand the difficulty of investigating this huge planet all alone—and the danger and overwhelming loneliness that came with it.

"…So Inari-senpai's skipping club and school was…"

Touya nodded at Homura's murmur.

"Senpai told me that, even if she ended up being the only club member, she would transfer over to Koma-senpai's Exploration Club at Hiyoshizaka High and continue there."

Homura was astonished.

"Isn't that… basically a club takeover? It was that bad?"

"Yeah. I couldn't stand that. Even if she were with Koma-senpai and her friends, it would have been too lonely."

Touya's cheeks burned red a little.

"—So, in the heat of the moment, I said that I would join the Exploration Club."

That moment was the instant he so easily gave up on practicing kendo in high school.

Senpai and Touya really were the same in that regard.

Homura couldn't help being shocked by the strength of their wills.

As someone who had enrolled at the school by chance and had joined the Exploration Club merely because she was scouted, Homura had no words to reply with.

"So… what did senpai say?"

"She said, 'I'll be waiting for you.'"

Touya's eyes were gentle as he gazed down in reminiscence.

"That made you happy, didn't it?"

"Yeah. I was happy. So much so that I thought I didn't care if I died right then."

Touya murmured that embarrassedly and scratched his head.

Next to him, Homura took a breath and let the tension leave her shoulders, before crossing her arms.

"I see… If this were a TV drama or movie, Touya-kun would be an excellent protagonist. Senpai would be the heroine and I'd play a supporting role."

"What're you talking about? You'd definitely be the protagonist. If this were an absurd gag manga, that is."

"Hey, hey, I was trying to encourage you with the greatest respect in my own way! What's with that attitude!? Just when I try to be nice, this is what I get!"

As Touya laughed, Homura indignantly drew up to him.

"At least call me the heroine of a cell phone novel, okay? Didn't you say I looked like someone straight from a movie scene before?"

"I did, but it's impossible for me to imagine you in that way anymore. You talk too much. And you reveal what you think too much."

Homura became completely miffed at those words.

Touya unconcernedly encouraged her.

"Don't undervalue yourself too much. I won't say something meaningless like everyone's a protagonist and first place in their own lives, but there's at least one time in every person's life when they can become a protagonist."

"…It'd be nice if that were the case."

While continuing to walk along the stone wall, they finally left the wetlands and approached the entrance to a forest filled with many diverse kinds of trees.

There, with his sharp sight, Touya found a rotten and deserted house.

It was a cabin that had almost entirely lost the form of a house and was filled with vines and leaves. They realized that it was a deserted house because there in the corners of the room lay the exposed keystones of what probably used to be pillars.

Homura picked up and stared carefully at a piece of wood that seemed to have been a fragment of a pillar.

"It's all crumbling and in pieces… like it's been abandoned for dozens… no, hundreds of years."

"Decomposition doesn't advance quickly in this cool climate, and since the humidity is strong due to the fog in the area, this place was probably abandoned since it wouldn't pose a risk of forest fire."

At the very least, there were no signs that anyone had visited this place recently.

Touya surveyed their surroundings further.

"It feels like a fishing cabin… Could there be a boat nearby?"

There wasn't any water, but there was a creek-like depression running towards the wetlands.

"A boat, huh… Things would have been so much easier earlier if we'd had a rubber raft…"

While thinking about such things, Homura felt some unknown discomfort in her chest once again, and she turned her camera downwards at the cabin ruins.

She turned her head as she felt her heart strongly pulled in a certain direction, and when she pushed her way through the nearby thicket—

"____"

Shocked, Homura drew back and hid behind Touya's back.

Touya immediately readied himself in stance to fight, and Homura pointed over his shoulder at the interior of the woods.

"T-There's… a person over there…"

"…It's not a fallen tree or something?"

"No. It's a person. They're standing there supporting their body with something."

Indeed, there was a silhouette standing pitched forward with their feet buried in the dirt beneath the shadows of the trees.

"Don't they see us? They couldn't be… dead, could they…?"

The human figure didn't move at all.

"Is it… a scarecrow?"

"If it were a scarecrow, it would have a better pose to scare off birds."

"Just what kind of pose is that?"

The two of them timidly approached while stepping on fallen leaves.

It was a wooden puppet whose original color had completely faded away and grown dull.

It was wearing ragged clothing and was leaning against a farming spade.

"So it's a scarecrow, just like you thought, Touya-kun…"

"……It's quite elaborately made."

The puppet had joints just like a human and, most surprisingly, looked much more recently made compared to the deserted house.

Homura took up the camera, while being cautious about not using up too much of her scarce remaining film.

"Ah, I know. Touya-kun, take the picture."

"Ah?"

"Look, I'm the first one to discover this, so don't you think I have the right to take a picture with it?"

"Your heart's self-possession is like concrete. Well, I'll take the picture since it's an important item of reference, though."

Shrugging, Touya took the camera from Homura.

Homura adopted over-familiarly stance next to the puppet and made a peace sign.

Suddenly, she noticed the pendant hanging from the puppet's neck.

When she pulled up the strap, a small bead-sized jewel inlaid in an almond-shaped wooden object appeared from the puppet's chest.

"…Hmm? What a fashionable puppet."

"…Ah… Hey, that's…"

Touya sucked in a breath and brought his face close to the jewel, a mysterious green glow being reflected in his eyes from it.

"…Isn't that a spirit stone?"

"Huh? Now that you mention it, it is a beautiful green…"

As Homura blinked and brought her face closer to inspect it, hard and rough fingers grabbed her arm.

"—Hi, hyah, gyah!"

The puppet moved towards Homura as she panicked and toppled over.

"—!"

Touya immediately threw the camera behind him and took out the swords at his hip.

The cord of the pendant around the puppet's necked was pulled along by Homura when she fell backwards, causing it to stretch and then finally snap.

The puppet's deformed amorphous and expressionless face came towards Homura.

"Noooooooo!"

Touya's vigor-filled sword stabbed its tip into the puppets neck, and it stopped moving as if it were sown in place.

"…!"

He shook it off his blade with all his might, causing it to slam into a tree bunk with a bang.

Touya thrusted his sword forward and mercilessly gazed at the puppet.

"T-Touya-kun, stop…!"

"Get back! It's dangerous!"

"It probably acted because I took this stone—"

Forgetting herself, Homura tried to step towards the puppet, but Touya desperately kept her back by blocking her with his arm.

The puppet let out a strange creak and stretched out its fingers as it lay against the base of the tree.

Homura reached over Touya's arm and held out the pendant.

"I'm sorry… Here."

However, the puppet's form had started to rapidly change.

Just like a piece of time lapse photography, it rotted away at an impossible speed.

Cracks spread across its entire body loudly, and its clothing became a lump of frayed dust and scattered to the ground.

"Oh my, oh my oh my…"

As Homura watched wide-eyed with her hand covering her mouth, the puppet shattered into pieces of wood chips until it no longer had a distinguishable human form.

The pendent in her palm shone brightly for an instant, but the light soon faded and disappeared.

"Aah~… What should I do? It feels like I did something bad…"

"…To think it actually moved. Now that was a shock. Was it something like a robot similar to Ameno?"

Touya swiped through the wreckage with his sword tip, but there was no longer any trace of the puppet that had stood there. It had completely decayed away along with the farming implement it had held.

The only traces left of its existence were the photos of it stored in the camera and the stone in Homura's hand.

"Compared to the appearance of the deserted house and the fields, this puppet was the only thing that seemed like it was recently made to me."

"D-Did it have some self-destruct spell cast on it…?"

"Self-destruct… No, it seemed more like a result of preservation magic. Like to prevent it from decaying. That's only if this this was a robot that was made to serve some purpose, though."

"I see. It was made from wood, after all. So they'd have to stop it from rotting, huh."

Homura once more looked at the supposed spirit stone in her hand.

"What should we do with this? Isn't it valuable?"

"Of course, we'll add it to the Exploration Club's materials—is what I'd like to say, but…"

Touya sighed.

"Do what you want with it, Hinooka. Right now, searching for senpai takes priority."

"Yeah…"

She looked down at her palm, conflicted.

In the end, she decided to bury it in the ground there.

She placed a branch she found to act as a gravestone amidst the tree roots where the puppet had been standing.

Touya also helped her set it up without saying anything.

As they left the puppet's grave site, Touya grumbled.

"It's a bit of a waste."

Homura gave a disappointed smile in return.

"…Yeah. But, I think the fact that it wore clothes means that someone had probably given it a name. It was surely treasured a lot."

Until it had been forgotten by that person.

"I see. Maybe so. By the way, what do you think its name was?"

"Eh… err… Yosack… II, or something?"

Touya burst out laughing.

Homura kicked his leg with a miffed expression.

"Oww!"

"Hey, I tried not to think about it as much as possible, but that valley of fog that senpai spoke of…"

"Don't say it. It's just a fake ghost story, right?"

"Maybe the people who got lost here were all turned into puppets…"

"Stop it!"

Eventually, the two of them ran into a small river that flowed out from the wetlands.

Further downstream, the river's current became stronger and turned into a mountain stream that flowed through the bottom of the valley.

As they followed the riverbank while looking down at the river, they noticed that they were walking down a clearly artificially-made path.

When they crossed a suspension bridge made of creeping plants over the rapid torrents, they arrived at a well sunlit mountain ridge.

When they strained their ears at the top of the small and quiet mountain summit, they could hear the sound of a waterfall flowing down into a basin.

After listening carefully to the mountain echoes and searching for the location of the waterfall, the two of them found the pointed end of what seemed to be a roof made of wood beyond a ridgeline hidden by trees.

"That! Isn't that the roof of a castle!?"

Homura pointed excitedly, and Touya nodded.

Homura hurriedly held up her camera, but Touya reprovingly told her not to waste film, so she gave up on taking pictures for now.

The two of them walked down a moss-covered forest road that was composed of smooth stone.

Before they reached where they believed the roof to be, they came to a plaza filled with orderly lined-up stone monuments on a gentle slope.

"…These are graves."

"…There's no mistakes. This is a graveyard."

Several stone huts were situated on the slope, and thin trapezoid-shaped tombstones were lined up in front of the stone doors.

The tombstones were colored a deep blue, like Nutella's evening sky.

The two of them found brand-new flowers that had just recently been picked placed in front of the graves, causing a shiver to go down the back of their necks.

"……"

They instinctively lowered their voices and ascended the path towards the center of the graveyard.

There were various silver-inlayed patterns or letters carved into the tombstones.

As he looked at them out of interest, Touya suddenly noticed a small gravestone at his feet.

"…Hmm?"

It was clearly different from the other graves. It consisted only of a stone placed at a small gap of a side road, but there were small wild flowers placed on it; someone had clearly come to mourn here.

"—T-Touya-kun! Come here! Look at this!"

"…Yeah!"

Touya reluctantly stood up at Homura's voice from further ahead.

When he caught up with her, he found her at the stone hut in the center of the graveyard, in front of which there was a conspicuously large tombstone which seemed to be the grave of someone important.

However, Homura was paying attention to the gravestone that had been discreetly placed beside the door of the stone hut.

"This one…"

The small gravestone she pointed at was made of a different kind of stone, and most noticeable of all, it was shaped like a short rectangular prism.

It was just like the kind of old-fashioned gravestones found at Japanese temples.

The gravestone, which had become completely moss-covered after years of exposure to mist, had many flowers placed on it that were even more beautiful compared to the others.

Touya's eyes widened, and he sat down to bring his face close to the gravestone.

"It has kanji characters written on it…!"

"Right!? They're quite old and faded so it's unreadable, though… Let's try removing the moss a bit."

"Stop it, stupid. This is someone's grave, you know?"

Touya tried partially reading the writing carved onto the gravestone beneath the moss.

"Bunsei… Year… 7… 9… huh? Bunsei Year 79[2]!? …Tengu Kakushi…"

"You mean like Hidden Tengu?[3]"

"This is… a family crest…? Late… Layman[4]…"

Though the unaccustomed writing was all gibberish to Homura, she undauntedly peeked down at it next to Touya.

"Whose grave is it?"

"Probably some adult man… Though it only has the posthumous Buddhist name[5] written here. Does Buddhism exist on Nutella?"

The two of them followed the writing that was vaguely visible through the moss and tried to do their best at a mock translation.

They were so focused on it that they didn't notice the footsteps approaching from behind them.

"—Suzu, is that thee[6]?"

The two of them jumped and turned around at the sudden sound of a young woman's voice.

On the road that weaved through the center of the graveyard, there was a woman with fluttering light golden hair dressed in a kimono.

There was the sound of footsteps on the stone pavement, and a giant white wolf followed behind her.

It was an extremely dreamlike sight that hardly felt real.

"…T-The witch…!?" Homura reflexively whispered.

The wolf had pure white fur with a grey patch on its brow. It was unmistakably the wolf that that girl from before had called Sekkachimaru, which had left a strong impression on Homura.

The woman stared dispassionately at Homura and Touya with emotionless eyes while keeping her hands within the sleeves of her kimono.

"Hoh, thieves, huh?"

The woman lightly raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised.

"I hath been called a paramour, but never a witch before[7]."

As she spoke, the woman scowled at the two of them as if appraising them, and the white wolf sensitively responded to the change in his master's demeanour by sinking down and growling.

Homura shuddered at the sight of its bared fangs.

"W-Wait a minute."

Both Touya and Homura unconsciously prepared themselves to fight in response to this dangerous development of events.

"We aren't anyone suspicious or dangerous," Touya insisted.

The woman turned to glare at Touya with a distrustful expression.

"…Touya-kun?"

Homura was shocked as Touya put his hands down at his waist.

However, Touya threw away the swords at his waist into a nearby bush along with his belt and showed his empty hands to the woman.

"We apologize for rudely trespassing in this graveyard. But please listen to what we have to say."

"Silence—"

The woman spoke calmly yet forcefully.

"…urk."

"I shan't listen to the pleading of cowardly grave robbers."

"We aren't thieves. We're searching for someone. Has one of our comrades come here?"

"…Comrade, huh. So thither still be another of thee? Truly only one?"

"She was taken away. By that wolf there."

"I asked if thither was another of thee."

Grasping that part of Touya's words, the woman took a step forward.

"A-And there was also a child! A girl with black hair and about this tall!"

When Homura interrupted and tried to explain with gestures, the woman visibly reacted.

"Are thou speaking of Suzu?"

The woman's half-lidded gaze became even colder.

"Not only do thee desecrate these graves, thou intend to spirit away my only family as well…?"

"We already said that we aren't thieves. But you really do know that girl! …Hey, what does spirit away[8] mean?"

Homura asked the last part to Touya in a small voice.

"She's mistaken us for kidnappers."

"Kidnappers? That's also a misunderstanding!"

Homura stepped towards the woman in protest, but the white wolf growled at her.

Homura froze at the sound of that deep snarl.

"Hii…"

"Hinooka, right now the priority is senpai—"

"But—"

The woman held back the white wolf, which looked about ready to jump at Homura, with one hand, and looked from Touya in front of her to the swords he had thrown away.

"Take thy blades."

"Wha… You're going to kill me for offense[9]? But aren't you barehanded?"

"I shall not repeat it twice."

Undaunted, Touya didn't move from in front of Homura.

After letting out a large sigh, he lowered and relaxed his tense shoulders.

"We came here from Earth, from Japan. Could it be the same for you as well? Do you know of Tokyo—no, of the town of Edo[10]?"

Touya spoke as calmly as possible, but his voice still shook a little.

However, as if to completely reject all of Touya's words, the woman's expression twisted and became painfully strained, and she pressed one hand's trembling fingers to her forehead.

"There are other people living on this planet, right? We've been searching for you people for more than ten years now—"

"…Enough."

The woman held out a trembling finger, and purple lightning began to form and crackle loudly at the tip of it.

It was a thick concentration of light consisting of several filaments of electricity that weaved together and changed form as it flashed.

—It was magic.

The flash of electricity that couldn't even be compared to the illumination spell used by Homura and Touya shone brightly even in the daylight.

"Be gone… thou wretched thieves who would disturb the sleep of mine ancestors…!"

The woman muttered while in clear anguish, her long hair stretching and spreading out.

Perhaps that was also magic, or perhaps it was a result of the pressure from her anger—

"Spirit—"

Purple lightning weaved and converged around her raised arm in a spiral.

"—Copper—"

When she heard the woman's first mutter, Homura had forcefully grabbed Touya by the nape of his neck and ran away pulling him as fast as she could.

Though he resisted for an instant, Touya immediately understood the danger and began running with her.

"—Flash[11]."

A blast of lightning shot out from her finger, tearing straight at Homura and Touya right on their heels.

Part of a tombstone was burst apart in its path.

"…Ouch…"

As they were showered in flowers petals that were sent flying and fragments of debris that were scattered through the air like bullets, Homura and Touya ran and escaped from the graveyard.

If it weren't for Homura's quick judgement, and if their leg strength wasn't enhanced on Nutella, they would have definitely been hit by the lightning spell.

Showing no signs of paying any consideration to her violent actions which had destroyed the graveyard, the woman—no, the witch—didn't pause in her attack.

"Bite them to death."

The white wolf howled and leapt forward.

"Damn it, what's with that woman!? She didn't listen to us at all!"

"She really is the witch!"

"This is the worst possible first contact… damn it."

Homura gasped as she ran.

There was a scorch mark on Touya's back from not having completely escaped the lightning.

A painfully red burn was visible on his skin beneath his burnt and torn clothes.

"Touya-kun… that wound—"

Ignoring Homura's words, Touya suddenly came to a stop.

"…Kuh… This path is no good, huh?"

The stone-paved forest path they were on was a gentle curve that was almost completely straight, offering an unobstructed view down it.

Even in the short time they stood still, they could tell that the wolf's howls were getting closer.

"This way."

"Eh!"

Touya grabbed Homura's arm and leapt into the grove of trees beside the road.

They ran to the point of tumbling down the steep slope.

As they went down several dozen meters, they collided with trees on the way and their hands came apart.

Even when she tumbled down to the ground beneath the slope, Homura immediately got up and searched for Touya around her, shouting.

"Touya-kun—! Where are you!?"

The reply came from within the grove of trees behind her.

"Hinooka, escape by yourself! I have to find senpai and—"

Touya's sorrowful shout was drowned out by a blood-chilling wolf howl.

The sounds of violent treading through leaves and Touya's battle cries got further away from Homura.

"Wait! Touya-kun, Touya-kun!"

Homura's desperate cries were absorbed by the forest, its heavy foliage making it hard to see through past the trees.

"……"

Having truly become alone on Nutella for the first time, Homura silently stood there.

The scent in the air was different from the graveyard, and the roaring of the waterfall could be heard from nearby amidst the silence of the forest.

"Am I supposed to do an emergency withdrawal—?"

Her heart throbbed painfully.

"After—After coming this far—?"

Cold sweat ran down her entire body, and the sensation of the Transport Ring on her left hand's middle finger once more felt foreign and conspicuous to her.

But—

Even that momentary hesitation wasn't permitted for her, as a raptor-like silhouette crossed the space between the trees towards her.

"Are thou finished running?"

The owner of that voice from above skillfully landed on the ground with the sleeves of her kimono fluttering.

Homura stood face to face with the witch, who didn't seem even slightly out of breath.

"Don't trouble these old bones of mine. Sooner or later, thy will inevitably be turned to cinders."

With mysteriously glowing eyes, she gazed down at the pitiful victim who had wandered astray into her domain.

"Phosphorous—"

Her red lips smiled, spinning words filled with magic power.

A familiar line of fire appeared at the tip of the witch's finger as she turned it around through the air.

The line of fire released a strange chafing noise—to be precise, it sounded like glass being chopped apart by scissors—and it turned into a whirling and bulging fireball.

"—Spirit—"

The flames, which reflected the patterns the witch folded together within her mind, steadily grew while overlaying with each other in geometric shapes, becoming huge in Homura's eyes as she stared at it.

She knew that, even if she immediately started running away, the fireball would chase after her according to the witch's will.

What Homura could do right now was limited.

She had two choices.

One choice was to not do anything. To just wisely and swiftly give up to despair.

And the other choice was—

"…H… Hi (Hydrogen)……!"

Looking at the small embers that appeared at Homura's fingertip, the witch's eyes narrowed.

"—Merciful—"

However, she didn't stop increasing the size of the fireball.

"Ox (Oxygen)… Ph (Phosphorous)…"

Homura desperately drew the pattern in her mind just as senpai had taught her and tried to catch up with the witch's incantation.

She gathered her concentration on a single point and weaved her trembling line of fire into a blazing flame.

"—Geyserite."

"Mg (Magnesium)!"

With the last part of the witch's chant, the fireball, which had swelled to half the size of her body, was fired from her fingertip.

Homura's fireball, whose chant had finished just a second later, swirled in place right front of her palm.

Homura fervently watched the approaching fireball, no, the coil of flames as it turned the daytime forest to night and cast a huge shadow over the trees behind it.

"—!"

It was a scathing volley hit back with a racket.

She raised her palm overhead at a slant and then swiped it down as she stepped forward to repel the witch's fireball.

The instant the edges of the two fireballs touched, a crushing impact hit Homura to her core and pushed her back.

Even so, she knew that if she loosened her concentration on this pure white light, she would simply die worthlessly without getting to meet anyone.

Within an instant that seemed to stretch unto eternity, Homura vividly felt the scorching heat licking her skin and her body's weight vanishing beneath her feet, but she kept concentrating—and compressed her fireball even smaller to drill it deep into the opposing fireball.

The fireball, having compressed to the point of becoming pure white heat, finally caused a crack to run through the other one.

The match of power crumbled away, and the witch's fireball swelled and became distorted.

"——!"

Both the fireball's existence and Homura's restrained breath reached their limit and came apart.

Like an iron candy bursting out from the melting pot of a blast furnace, a wave of fire was sent flying across the surrounding area and, in the next instant, turned to smoke and dispersed.

Just like what had happened that time when Homura tried using magic by the riverbed some time ago, the whole area was wrapped in smoke and turned dark as if it were evening.

The witch protected her face from the smoke with her sleeve.

"This is unexpected…"

Though her attack had been parried, her tone as she murmured somehow seemed happy.

"To think thou would also use Mathematica[12]—in that case, thy have greater potential worth nurturing than Suzu."

On the other hand, Homura had been harshly thrown to the ground.

As the pungent smoke hung thickly in the air, Homura looked up at the human silhouette that had swiftly grabbed and hugged her when she fell, and she widened her eyes.

"Senpai! Thank goodness, you're safe…!"

"Hinooka-san."

It was definitely Misasagi-senpai.

Senpai nodded, old-looking manacles on her wrists with severed chain links hanging off them. Bandages had been awkwardly wrapped around her abdomen. A bow she had obtained from somewhere unknown was resting on her shoulder.

Without wasting time, senpai questioned Homura.

"Where's Touya-kun—?"

"Eh… he's…"

Homura was rendered speechless.

Misasagi-senpai had apparently figured out Homura's location from the explosive sound of the magic battle and the rising smoke.

However, even Homura only vaguely knew which direction Touya had headed in.

"When we were running from the wolf, he acted as a decoy for me…"

Senpai's expression clouded over in anguish at Homura's words.

In a brief instant, Misasagi ascertained the degree of Homura's injuries and glanced at the Transport Ring on her finger.

"Can you stand?"

The two of them stooped low and left the area.

Homura asked senpai anxiously.

"…Senpai, what do we do?"

"This place is too dangerous."

Senpai's voice was cold, sounding like a completely different person to Homura.

"We'll return by ourselves. We can't join back up with Touya-kun."

"…No way…"

Homura's feet came to a stop at a point close to the river bank where the sound of the waterfall could be heard.

"No… I'll stay behind."

Homura shook her head, but senpai stepped up to her.

"He'll surely understand."

"No! After coming all this way—"

"Keep your voice down."

Senpai grabbed Homura's arm and pulled her close.

"This place is extremely far from the base camp, and we don't have sufficient magic power to return. An emergency withdrawal will be unstable, and it's uncertain whether even the two of us will be able to get back—"

"……"

At first, Homura was speechless.

"We won't know until we try!"

Homura protested and threw off senpai's hand.

Homura's cheeks were swelled and stuck out.

As Homura tried to restrain her hot cheeks, dumbfounded at her own reaction, senpai spoke with a severe gaze.

"If we fail, we'll all die. We won't be able to save Touya-kun at another opportunity either in that case."

Though she spoke firmly, senpai's expression was distorted and seemed ready to cry at any moment.

"I'm sorry for arriving so late."

Gritting her teeth, she placed a hand on Homura's shoulder.

"It'll be okay. He's strong. Even I managed to survive here."

"……"

Homura nodded in mortification.

"—So thither thou are."

A sneering laugh rang through the forest.

The witch had appeared in pursuit of them.

"I had intended to burn thee until not even thy bone remained, but tis seems to have been insufficient."

Both her voice and gaze emitted a strong madness that hated and rejected all outsiders.

She didn't even seem to care that the person now standing next to Homura wasn't the boy Touya.

The witch once more took a stance to use magic.

"Thou shalt pop and burst apart, like roasted chestnuts."

Homura and Misasagi-senpai turned around and desperately ran away from the fireball that was loudly swelling up behind them.

The forest came to an end, and they found themselves at the bank of the river which ran from the basin of the waterfall.

"We're withdrawing! Form a strong self-image and concentrate on it!"

"Yes!"

Senpai's hand grabbed Homura's hand which had the Transport Ring on it.

As the sound of trees being mowed down came from behind them and the fireball quickly approached, the two of them jumped towards the water basin.

"Disengage[13]—!"

Chapter 18 END

1 This is another of Touya's bad puns that doesn't translate into English, so I had to change it to better fit the translation. Thanks go to reader dbm for suggesting the lake pun.

2 Bunsei: This is a specific era in Japan's traditional calendar scheme which changes era according to the enthronement of a new emperor. The Bunsei era went from about 1818 to 1830. Most likely, "Bunsei Year 79" was written on the assumption that the Japanese calendar system didn't change eras, so from the perspective of whoever wrote it, it was around 1897 AD when the gravestone was placed there. (Though this might not be accurate in actual historic time, considering the time distortion between Earth and Nutella.)

3 "Tengu Kakushi" literally means "Tengu Hidden/Hiding" (a tengu is a mythological creature/deity in Japan), but I wrote it as "Hidden Tengu" when Homura said it, since that phrasing makes more sense in English.

4 The actual term used here is grhapati, which is a Buddhist term for householders/laypersons, and is sometimes used as a posthumous suffix.

5 A tradition to give a new name to the deceased upon their death, shared by Buddhism and many other religions.

6 This character speaks in an old dialect of Japanese, so I'll try my best to do the equivalent in English, but I'll be putting more priority on making it understandable than being linguistically accurate.

7 Once again, this is a sentence whose meaning cannot be properly translated in English. Homura calls her a witch (maho), which sounds similar to paramour (mao).

8 Here, a less common and older word for "kidnap" is used, so the best equivalent I came up with in English that Homura might not know is "spirit away".

9 This is a Japanese term dating back to the feudal era, referring to how samurai had the right to kill any commoners who were perceived to have offended their honor in some way.

10 Edo: old name of Tokyo.

11 The witch's incantations consist purely of independent kanji characters that make no sense combined together, and they're more like fancy phrases than anything with deep meaning, so don't try to read into it too much. (Think something similar to the attack names that appear in a lot of manga and anime.)

12 Here, it says Mathematica in furigana, while the kanji beneath it basically translates as "Dust Threat Technique".

13 Beneath the furigana "Disengage" is the kanji for "emergency withdrawal".

Chapter 19

Homura and Misasagi-senpai's arrival point was neither the Transport Room nor anywhere else within the club building.

It was on the roof of the club building. Several meters in the air above it, that is.

The first one to greet them was Ameno, who just happened to be on the roof at the time.

After hearing Homura's shriek and looking out from the door of the astronomical observation dome, Ameno ran over at a trot and spoke in a voice that lacked any urgency or tension.

"Welcome back. You guys returned a lot earlier than planned. But why here?"

Homura stood up while rubbing her butt.

The club president was on her knees in a sunken state beside her.

"W-We're back, Ame-chan… Call sensei. I-It's an emergency."

"Ye~s. I'm sending her a wake-up call right now. Please wait a little bit."

Ameno tilted her head in puzzlement.

"…Only you and the club president, Homura-san? Where's Takumi-san?"

Ameno looked around the rooftop restlessly and then leaned over the railing to look down at the schoolyard.

This late at night, there was no one to be seen on the school grounds. The only illumination to be seen came from the club building.

Neither Homura nor senpai answered Ameno's question.

"Something happened, huh?"

The sound of running footsteps approached from the staircase, and Fujimori-sensei jumped onto the rooftop. She apparently hadn't gone to bed yet, this time.

Looking over the exhausted and battered Homura and senpai with several pieces of their equipment missing, Fujimori immediately understood that they had done an emergency withdrawal.

She pursed her lips and looked over the two of them with a tense expression.

"Sensei, Touya-kun was—!"

Homura turned to Fujimori imploringly.

"Well done returning home, Hinooka…… Misasagi?"

Fujimori looked over at the club president, who was still on her knees and hanging her head.

She finally looked up at Fujimori and gave her report with a pained expression.

"Hinooka-san, and I, were the, only ones, to return…"

Ameno gasped.

"Please send out, a rescue request. Touya-kun is, in danger."

"Understood. Do you know the specific location where he's been stranded?"

"I know—ah, the camera…"

When she looked over her shoulder, Homura realized that she had lost her bag. It must have fallen off when she ran down the hill.

"Umm~, I think it was near the center of the unmapped territory we were supposed to investigate…"

"All right. Tell me the details while we move."

Fujimori was also aware that they couldn't waste even a second of time right now.

The four of them left the club building and headed to the school parking lot, where they then got into Fujimori's Mini-Cooper.

"Hinooka, contact Koma—club president Kamikoma and tell her we're going to pick her up. It's faster if we only have to stop by there briefly."

Fujimori tossed a terminal into the backseats where Homura and senpai were sitting, and Homura frantically caught it.

"Y-Yes."

"Ameno, call Professor Tanakura at Hiyoshizaka High."

"Hirosuke-san, right? Well, it's true that I can act as a hands-free phone using my internal functions, but it's not exactly pleasant for—"

"Just hurry up and call him."

"Doing so now."

Ameno connected the call to the other party while grumbling, "I guess this makes me a true Android phone."

Meanwhile, the Mini-Cooper dashed through the roadway at night.

Club president Kamikoma's home was apparently on the way to Hiyoshizaka High.

"……"

Homura was worried about senpai beside her, who had been hanging her head without speaking a word since they got in the car.

"…Ah, Koma-senpai? The truth is—"

Homura managed to reach Kamikoma and explained the request to rescue Touya, who had been left behind on Nutella, and Kamikoma understood and agreed to it in a shockingly calm manner.

Fujimori-sensei also contacted the advisor for the Hiyoshizaka club and seemed to have arranged a plan to meet up at their school.

Next, Ameno passed a handheld game console to Homura.

"Hmm? What's this?"

"That contains a conjectural map of the unmapped territory you went to. We showed it to you before you departed, remember? If you can recall the route you took through it and the spot where you did an emergency withdrawal, please mark it there."

"All right. I'll mark everything I can remember. What will we do with the map afterwards?"

"We'll give the data to the Hiyoshizaka High Exploration Club."

Homura nodded in understanding, but when she thought of how she might end up entrusting Touya's rescue to someone else, she felt lonely despite understanding the necessity.

While zooming down the highway, Fujimori looked into her rear-view mirror.

"Misasagi, how are your injuries?"

Hearing those words, Homura was startled as she recalled senpai's state.

"T-That's right, senpai. Your injuries… just who on earth treated them?"

Homura looked at the bandages around senpai's abdomen painfully.

"…I'm, fine. For the, time being, anyway. There's no sign, of infection, either."

"When we arrive, go see Tanakura. Wounds from beast claws can be quite troublesome. Even if your body's resistance increases when you're on Nutella, there have been cases where investigators became ill after returning here."

"…Yes."

"Sensei, senpai's injuries aren't from the wolves. It's from when she protected me from the explosion."

"Either way, she has to get herself looked at and treated."

"Hirosuke-san is a doctor, after all."

"…Is Hirosuke-san the advisor of the Exploration Club at Hiyoshizaka High?"

"That's right. He's a former investigator who was part of the same group as Chiayu-san. He's also Chiayu-san's ex-boyfriend."

Fujimori did a spit take.

Homura grabbed the back of the seat in front of her and leaned forward as she questioned Ameno dubiously.

"…By ex-boyfriend… you mean Mori-chan is a divorcee?"

"He was never my boyfriend or my spouse! Don't get sidetracked at a time of emergency like this."

While they chatted like this, the Mini-Cooper arrived at a residential district and stopped in front of Kamikoma's home.

Kamikoma, illuminated by the car's headlights, had already finished preparing and was waiting for them at her front door.

"We're indebted to you for this, Koma."

"No, no, we're in the same boat here."

Kamikoma gallantly climbed into the back seats, carrying a big and sturdy-looking instrument case on her back.

"Thanks for coming. Koma-senpai—is that your saxophone?"

"No, this is a lute. It's my personal weapon."

"You want me to open the trunk to put it in?" Fujimori asked.

"Ah, no, I'll carry it on me. Chiayu-san's trunk is a complete mess, after all."

"I can stuff you into the trunk instead, you know."

"I'm not that curious."

Smiling wryly, Kamikoma handed the case to Ameno.

After Kamikoma crossed over Homura's knees and sat in the center of the back seats, the car resumed driving.

Kamikoma worried over the completely depressed Misasagi.

"Mayo, are you okay?"

Misasagi nodded weakly.

"…All right. Then, Homura, can you explain the situation as best as you can?"

"Y-Yes. What happened was—"

During their short drive to Hiyoshizaka High, Homura summarized the series of events starting from when they had received the surprise attack up to when they had to regretfully do an emergency withdrawal.

She explained how their base camp had been thoroughly destroyed and they'd been caught in a trap while the enemy lay in wait.

She explained how they'd suddenly been attacked by wolves, how those wolves had been led by a young girl, and how senpai had been injured and then kidnapped by them.

She explained how she thought that girl might be a missing child who disappeared three years ago.

She explained how they'd taken a completely different route than they'd planned and entered the unmapped area.

She explained how they'd encountered a Nutellan, a hostile witch within the unmapped area.

And she explained how, after being attacked by the witch and running away from her, Homura ended up being forced to leave Touya behind on Nutella and return to Earth with senpai, who had managed to safely escape her capture.

Both Kamikoma and Fujimori-sensei listened closely to Homura's fast-paced report without interjecting, merely asking the minimum-required questions every once in a while.

"Haaah…"

After hearing everything, Fujimori faced the steering wheel and let out a large sigh.

"…My comrades and I also got caught up in a lot of trouble and scandals during our investigations back in our time, but what you guys went through is even worse than any of that."

"Eh?"

"That's right. To sum it up, this is a huge incident that could shake the entire Earth."

Kamikoma also nodded in agreement.

"Things are going to turn into a big, chaotic mess after this."

"H-Haa…" Homura vaguely responded with a shrug.

"Is that so?"

Ameno, who didn't seem to quite get it like Homura, was currently making an enquiry to the police about the details of the missing child incident after learning the girl's name from Homura.

Kamikoma crossed her arms and spoke.

"Since there'll be a need to bring back Touya and that missing child with us when we return to Earth… we're only going to be able to send three people to Nutella."

"O-Only three? But doesn't Hiyoshizaka's Exploration Club have a lot of members—?"

"Sorry, that's the limit with the amount of magic energy we currently have charged in our Transport Rings. We could bring one more person if we wait another three days, but we don't have that kind of time."

After being told that, Homura could only nod meekly in response.

If they waited three days here on Earth, eighteen days would pass on Nutella in the meantime.

"Only three, huh? That'll make things quite hard… I'll leave the selection of members to you, Koma," Fujimori declared.

"Yep. I'll discuss it with our club's advisor."

Fujimori nodded in agreement.

They entered the metropolitan area of Honmachi.

When they arrived at Hiyoshizaka High while gazing sidelong at the relatively small school grounds made of urethane rubber pavement, an eight-seater single-box car had already arrived at the school parking lot.

"Koma-senpai, that car belongs to Professor Tanakura, your club advisor—?"

"Yep."

Suddenly, a giant man big enough to fill three seats by himself got out from the back seat of the temporarily parked single-box car. He was so huge that, the instant he got off, the car trembled from the release of his great weight.

"Huge… so huge!"

When Homura and the others left their car and went to face him, Homura couldn't help speaking out rudely in awe.

The man had a stern gaze that looked at them from half-lidded eyes. His shaggy sideburns gave him a wild image.

If Homura had met him alone on the sidewalk in the middle of the night, she might have burst into tears.

"This is our club's vice-president, Taga Taichi. He's a second-year student."

The man called Taichi bowed his head slightly.

Facing this giant who stood looming amidst the parking lot at night, Homura managed to greet him despite being taken aback.

"N-Nice to meet you. Umm, I'm Hinooka Homura."

"Ussu," Taichi replied in acknowledgement.

Compared to his powerful appearance, his quiet and docile expression made quite an impression.

"Chiayu—"

"Kyah!"

Fujimori-sensei jumped with a start when she heard her name called.

Someone in a white doctor's coat appeared from the driver's seat of the other car.

It was Professor Tanakura, a man with a slightly small and plump build.

He walked over to the rest of them, looking worried.

"So Touya-kun's the one who was stranded?"

"Y-Yeah—but the situation is quite complicated."

"All right. I'll listen to the details in the clubroom. I should call over the other club members as well."

"Thanks."

Still wearing her driving glasses, Fujimori hesitantly nodded and pointlessly readjusted her glasses.

Though this should have been Homura's first time meeting him, she felt like she remembered him from somewhere, and sure enough, he was one of the people within the photo on Fujimori-sensei's desk.

"Misasagi-kun. And Hinooka-kun. Good job returning safe and sound."

"N-No, I wasn't able to do anything on my own."

She was no match for these people, who had responded to this sudden call to meet late at night without any indication of displeasure. Their virtuousness pierced her heart.

The group of seven people composed of Exploration club members from two different schools walked through the school entrance and headed towards the Exploration Club building within the school grounds.

This was Homura's first time visiting Hiyoshizaka High. She really wished that she could have come here to play at a more peaceful time.

"I have to contact Touya's parents."

"Yeah. And I have to report to head of the local branch."

As they walked through the school corridor, Fujimori murmured with a bitter expression and Tanakura nodded in agreement.

"Back in our days, such rules and procedures were often ignored, though. And now we're the ones who see off the young ones," Tanakura remarked ruefully.

Ignoring the conversation between the teachers, Kamikoma looked back at Homura and Misasagi.

"Go use the showers here, you two."

"Eh? But we don't have that kind of leisure—"

"You're both covered in mud and a complete mess, you know? I say this as someone who was stuck between you two in the car."

When it was put so frankly, Homura finally grew conscious of her terrible state and became embarrassed.

Hearing that, Tanakura turned to look at them, particularly the bandages around Misasagi's abdomen, and asked a question.

"Misasagi-kun, did you receive that external wound on Nutella?"

"That's right, she's been acting so composed that I forgot about it," Kamikoma said in realization.

"She can really be a handful that way, geez."

Fujimori came to a stop at a fork in the corridor which faced the courtyard, and pointed one way while she walked over to escort senpai down the other corridor.

"You all go ahead to the club building. There should be a shower room there."

Suddenly, Ameno stepped forward and clung to senpai.

"Ah, I'll escort her, Chiayu-san," Ameno suggested.

"I see… Then I'll leave it to you. Misasagi, come over once you've finished being treated."

"…Yes."

Nodding, senpai headed to the infirmary in the company of Ameno and Tanakura-sensei.

Homura watched senpai leave, feeling lonely as she did so.

Of course, Misasagi-senpai wasn't really composed at all. She just hadn't said anything on the way here.

The other group resumed heading towards the club building.

"Sensei, Mayo is—"

Kamikoma peeked over at Fujimori, who still wore a bitter expression.

"…Is senpai going to be okay?"

Homura asked that question to no one in particular as they arrived at the club building of Hiyoshizaka's Exploration Club, which had been boldly remodelled from ordinary classrooms. She forgot to even observe Hiyoshizaka's club building, which she was seeing for the first time.

Fujimori, who would normally crack a friendly joke at a time like this, remained silent.

"……"

Kamikoma sat down on an office chair in the standby room and spun the seat around. The giant Taga stood silently behind her like a bodyguard. They were truly a mismatched club president and vice-president.

"…This isn't the first time that Misasagi has experienced an accident involving an emergency withdrawal."

Kamikoma began speaking bit by bit.

"It happened during the autumn of last year. Inari was still around back then. They were investigating a certain set of ruins, but Mayo was too absorbed in it. She was impatient to make an achievement and misjudged when to pull out. Back then, the ones who were left behind on Nutella were Mayo and Inari."

"……"

Fujimori remained silent as she listened.

"Inari had a precious familiar[1]. And she lost that familiar due to Mayo's mistake."

"The two of them… were best friends?" Homura asked.

"Yeah," Kamikoma said with a deep nod. "I still can't believe that their friendship was broken off. What happened back then left a deep wound in the hearts of both Mayo and Inari that still exists even now."

"Misasagi is…"

Fujimori spoke up with a gloomy tone.

"Misasagi is the kind of person who can endure any pain if she bears it alone. But—"

Fujimori suddenly looked at Homura.

"If something happens to Touya… No, considering the situation, there's no way he'll be unharmed. If something happens on Nutella that makes it impossible for Touya to continue as part the Exploration Club…"

If something happens that threatens his life—

"Misasagi can't endure losing any more comrades. Her fear will take control and make her incapable of making sound decisions anymore. She'll be finished as an investigator."

Chapter 19 END

1 Familiar: a term referring to enchanted animals/spirits (usually small in size) that serve as helpers to mages.

ooh...
why did I die?

Chapter 20

Touya awoke on a stone floor.

His languid sleep was torn away by the cold in the air and the numbness of his limbs.

There was a dusty smell here similar to that of the base camp's basement. The air also felt damp.

In the dim space, various survival tools were laid out on the floor in a disorderly fashion.

He could also faintly see the contours of various tool-like objects whose purpose he couldn't divine —and the fact that he could see them meant that it wasn't nighttime right now.

—It's like I'm in the middle of a painful dream.

Those words, said by someone to him before, resurfaced in his mind.

There were dried tear tracks left at the corners of his eyes, and the sensation of having seen a bad dream lurked in the back of his mind.

He strained his ears as he remained in his prone position, and he heard the faint sound of a waterfall.

The out-of-place feeling on his ankles was from shackles placed on them. His hands were also bound by rope, preventing him from moving freely.

"Hey—hey."

Suddenly, the tip of a bare foot lightly poked his head.

"Ani-san. Oanii-san[1]. Are you dead?"

At last, his memories started coming back to him, and his consciousness regained focus.

"I've brought food. If you're alive, get up and eat it."

A burnt bamboo pipe was rolled in front of his eyes.

The still-hot pipe was emitting bubbles of rice paste and giving off steam.

There seemed to be grilled fish cooked with rice inside it, and it gave off such a savory smell that it caused Touya's forgotten hunger to attack him from the pit of his stomach.

"……Kuh…"

Enduring the pain, Touya lifted the upper half of his body and came face-to-face with a little girl who was crouching and peering at him inquisitively.

She was also chewing on a piece of fruit in her hands.

Touya shifted to sitting cross-legged and properly faced the girl while scratching his head.

"You're that wolf girl, right? That missing child that Hinooka mentioned."

"Hah? I'm Suzuran."

"…I see, Suzuran, huh?"

Hearing her name repeated by him, the girl's face became slightly red.

It appeared she wasn't used to having her name said straight to her face like that.

"It's a secret from Hime[2]. Hurry up and eat."

"Didn't you say that you didn't care if a thief died?"

The girl lifted her slender chin and snorted defiantly.

"You didn't kill any of my wolves with your sword."

"I was just too busy trying to defend myself back then."

Touya spoke his frank feelings, but the girl continued speaking.

"Sekkachimaru didn't kill you either. So I'll help you."

"By Sekkachimaru, you mean that huge white wolf?"

"Are you going to eat it or not?"

"……"

The girl glared at him.

Unable to win against his hunger, Touya picked up the bamboo pipe.

He had neither chopsticks nor a fork, so he took out a bamboo leaf within the pipe and scooped up the food on top of it while using his bare hands to eat. Having tableware wouldn't have changed his lack of freedom much, considering his hands were tied together.

However, the taste was different from what Touya expected, making his face reflexively break into a smile.

The girl who had named herself as Suzuran watched him happily as if she were the one eating.

Judging by the brightness in the air, it appeared to be sometime early in the morning right now.

The light that leaked into the room gradually brightened, and Touya managed to figure out that he was in an arch-shaped cave constructed at the base of a castle, most likely a stable.

Even as he ate the food, the terrifying memories of yesterday's events played back through Touya's mind one after another.

It was the memory of a completely one-sided struggle, with the ferocious white wolf cornering him and easily smashing the branches he'd used in place of his swords. He was finally hit by its claws and thrown into the rocky area of the river, on the verge of being crushed by its huge body.

He couldn't believe he was still alive right now.

Right before he had blacked out, he had looked up from the ground and seen the cold eyes of the witch looking down at him.

"…I'll give this back to you."

After wiping his fingers on his cuffs, Touya took out a hair ornament from his pocket.

It had been torn off Suzuran's head from the blow he'd dealt against her during the initial surprise attack a few days ago.

"The hairpin I got from Hime…!"

The girl grabbed the hairpin as if to steal it away from him.

"Tch, so you really are a thief."

"Haha. I'd intended to bring it back as proof of making first contact, but I'm not in a position to say that anymore."

"Fausto kontaku?"

As Suzuran arranged the hairpin back in her hair, Touya once again spoke up.

"By Hime, do you mean that scary woman? Is that person the… mistress of this castle?"

"That's right. Hime is my mistress and my foster parent."

"Foster parent…? Then what about your real mother, Suzuran?"

"My mom is Sekkachimaru."

"Huh?"

"I don't remember it myself, but apparently Sekkachimaru picked me up from within the forest when I was a baby. That's why Sekkachimaru is my mom."

"…I see."

Leaving aside the veracity of her claim, her words seemed to support Homura's conjecture.

"Is there anyone else here?"

"There's lots. Kirimaru, Kosuke, Koroku—"

"Aren't those… the names of wolves? I'm asking if there are any other humans living in this castle."

"There aren't any. There's only ever been me and Hime here."

"…Just the two of you… huh?"

Touya couldn't hide his disappointment at hearing that.

And though he really had wanted to ask his next question from the start, he voiced it hesitantly.

"Hey, what happened to my companions?"

"They died."

"…!"

"That girl who used Mathematica ran way with that Mayo person, before they died together."

The girl declared it bluntly.

"Mayo… you mean senpai? The person you took away!?"

Touya leaned forward and questioned her accusingly, and Suzuran uncomfortably wrinkled her nose.

"It's because she went and ran away on her own…"

"Liar! She died!? She really died!?"

"I'm not lying… I watched the whole thing from afar while I hid…"

Suzuran hugged her knees and curled upon herself.

"They jumped into the waterfall basin while being chased by Hime, and then there was a huge flash, and they didn't resurface afterwards."

"…A flash…?"

Touya immediately guessed the true meaning of the sight that Suzuran described.

That bright flash was surely the light of an emergency withdrawal.

Even if that wasn't the case, it was too unnatural for the two of them to just disappear after jumping into the water. This told him that they had managed to escape from the witch in some way.

Touya gradually regained his calm. Even so, he still hadn't restrained his anger as he continued questioning Suzuran.

"Why did you kidnap senpai?"

"…"

The girl downheartedly dropped her shoulders and refused to meet his gaze, looking just like a reprimanded dog.

If she was self-aware of the fact that what she did was wrong, then there was hope that she could change and rehabilitate.

"Lately, Hime has been acting strange… The wolves don't listen to what I say either…"

The girl murmured in a disheartened tone, so Touya tried speaking to her seriously.

"Suzuran, I have something important to tell you. Please listen."

"I have to go now. Hime will wake up soon."

Suzuran stood up and moved to leave.

"Why are you running away from Hime?"

"She'll get angry at me."

"Isn't she your mistress and the person who raised you?"

"……"

Suzuran's expression sank as she unconsciously played with her hairpin, and on the arm she lifted up was the bracelet that Homura had talked about.

It consisted of a faded plastic ring bound and reinforced with strings of vines. The jingling part was broken, but it was definitely the remains of what was once a toy rattle.

"—Were you scared, Suzuran? That's why you kidnapped senpai, Mayo? To get a replacement for Hime. A replacement mother. Yeah, it's true that senpai and Hime look a bit alike."

The girl hesitated as she was about to leave and couldn't shake off Touya's words.

Enduring his body's pain, Touya stood up.

"Suzuran. Your mother is neither Sekkachimaru nor Hime. Your real mother is on Earth. Come back to Earth with me."

"……Earth?"

"Yeah, it's where you come from."

"…Kuh… I can't do that. I can't leave Hime alone…!"

At that moment, a voice calling her name came from outside, making Suzuran jump.

"—Suzu, is that thee?"

"……!"

The moment she heard that, the girl became frantic and knocked over several tools on the ground as she ran out of the stable.

"Hey, Suzu! Come back here!"

The voice scolded her.

The owner of the voice entered the stable while grumbling.

"Even though 'tis time for her morning practice… That girl should start acting her age already…"

Touya tensely went on guard.

The person who had entered the dim stable saw Touya standing alongside the wall and suddenly stopped walking.

"Hyah!"

She faltered in shock and pressed her hands against the chest of her kimono, which was wrapped in a sash. However, Touya was the one who was surprised here.

Her appearance was definitely that of the witch who had attacked Touya and Homura yesterday. But the atmosphere she gave off was somehow different now.

"W-What was that for? Don't surprise me like that."

While adjusting her breathing and taking some deep breaths, she stared at Touya fixedly.

"Are thou—"

She looked at the cords binding his hands and feet, and then peered closely at Touya's face.

"—Kumagorou?"

"…Huh?"

"Then, Hachi perhaps?"

"No."

She clapped her hands in realization.

"Haha, I got it—thou art the retiree from the tenement house, right?"

"I'm not Kumagorou, Hachi, or the retiree from the tenement house!"

"…?"

She touched all over Touya's cheeks with a puzzled expression.

Touya had been prepared to have his life in danger, but he just couldn't keep up with this.

"My, I bethought thou wast a life-like puppet, but—could thou perchance be a guest from afar?"

"Guest… I guess that's one way to put it. Anyway, I'm not a puppet, I'm human."

"If thou art a human, why art thou tied up? Art thy a criminal?"

"……You really don't remember? You did this. You set that wolf after me."

"I did?"

She pointed at herself and tilted her head in puzzlement.

"I don't recall that at all."

Touya couldn't help but sigh and feel drained at how much difference there was from her truly fearsome and witch-like manner yesterday.

Suddenly, the iron shackles on his legs unlocked by themselves with a clank.

Rolling up her sleeves, the witch beckoned to him.

"Lift thy arms… Hmm… these wast tightly bound…"

She took out a small knife and cut the rope. Touya had suddenly become free.

As Touya rubbed his swollen arms, the witch gracefully bowed to him.

"I misunderstood it as another one of Suzu's pranks. Please forgive me."

"…Based on your behavior, you don't seem to remember senpai or Homura either."

"…?"

The witch became puzzled again.

This was a once-in-a-million chance for Touya to escape.

But Touya chose not to do that.

If Homura and senpai had safely completed the emergency withdrawal, they would request help to save him and other investigators would eventually come here. When that time came, they had to avoid it turning into another conflict at any costs. That was Touya's thinking.

And he was also concerned about Suzuran, who had run away to hide herself.

"I'm Touya Takumi."

"Touya—"

The witch nodded as she put her hands back within her sleeves in a calm and easy manner.

"Thou mayest refer to me as Iotsumisumaru no Hime[3]. I toldeth Suzu to calleth me either Subaru or just Hime, so I doth not mind if thou doth the same."

"…Then, can I call you Subaru-hime?"

"Thou'll maketh me blush."

The witch smiled as she swept her haori[4] around her to escape from the cold morning air.

Touya was startled at how her appearance as she let out white breath in the cold air reminded him of senpai once again.

"Shalt we go have breakfast? The sun wilt have already risen if we wait for that truant tomboy."

When Touya mentioned that Suzuran had just fed him—

"Then I shalt pour some tea. Thou art a rare and precious guest, after all."

Touya was given a tour inside the castle.

It was an old stone castle that had been kept clean.

The castle's construction was actually very similar to their base camp. They had both probably been constructed by the same group of craftsman in eras close to each other. However, there were almost no points of commonality between them when it came to interior design. Both the furniture and decorations fit in well with this castle, proof that substantial years of work and training had gone into making the place.

The castle was built on a slope with the mountain at its back, and the stable that Touya had been tied up in was in a semi-basement that reached from the ground floor down to the castle basement.

And now, Touya was looking down at the vista below the castle from a high terrace after having climbed some stairs.

Before him was a small plain located in a mountain valley.

There were orchards and a small cultivated field at one corner of the plain, where many puppets could be seen tilling the soil. Subaru had called them "puppets[5]", and the human-like doll that Touya and Homura had encountered in the marshland forest was most likely the same. He felt intrigued by the idea of puppets that moved with magic.

Touya could also see livestock pens near them, and sometimes he could hear the clucking sound of chickens.

Enclosures that looked a lot like Japanese tea arbors could be glimpsed amidst the village, and the whole village, which looked so different from the construction and decorative style of this old castle, gave off a strange and mysterious feeling for Touya.

"It's so peaceful…"

As he quietly felt awed by this sight, Touya was offered to sit at the table on the terrace.

It seemed like a compact and peaceful life, with more than enough for Subaru-hime and Suzuran to live here by themselves as long as the puppet workforce was maintained. Touya didn't see anything like fences to block outside invaders either.

There was a weaving machine with weaving cloth still inserted in it on the terrace. The cloth had the same kind of strange design pattern as the kimonos that Suzuran and Subaru wore.

After setting tea utensils on the table, the witch sat down facing Touya and gazed at the same vista as him with a teacup in hand.

"Won't thou consume some pickled radish?"

"Haah. Were these vegetables grown in those fields?"

"Indeed."

As Touya gave thanks for the food and reached a hand out to the plate, the witch looked at him with a proud expression.

Touya seemed to be forgetting the situation he'd been placed in a bit too nonchalantly.

However, it was the witch who broached the topic.

"—Now then, Touya. The fact that we can speaketh the same language means that thou cometh from Edo or some other feudal domain in the land of the rising sun, correct?"

"You can tell…!?"

"Of course. Thou ranneth afool of the Tengu Kakushi, correct? It must has't been difficult."

"Then, are you also from Earth… from Edo?"

"No. I wast born in this land and hath taken mine first bath as an infant in the water of that waterfall."

At that point, Subaru's words cut off and she took a quiet breath.

"The one who cameth from Edo is mine father."

"Your… father?"

In that case, she was a half-breed born from a Nutellan and an Earthling from centuries past—Touya surreptitiously gulped.

"Mine father wast a retainer of the shogun, serving as chief treasurer."

Touya was already plenty taken aback by her first words, but it was even more disconcerting to hear the kind of words from historical dramas like "retainer" and "chief treasurer" from the mouth of a golden-haired princess who didn't look Japanese at all.

He felt like he couldn't look down on Homura anymore for having teased him that it was all like a game.

"By retainer, you mean he was an upper-class samurai serving directly under a shogun[6], right? Then, what was the name of the feudal lord that he served—?"

"He was called Ienari the Fool."

"The Fool… eh…?"

When he heard the shogun's name, Touya reflexively shuddered.

Tokugawa Ienari was the shogun who ruled for several decades around 1800 AD.

In Nutella's flow of time, that would have been at least over a thousand years in the past.

Despite the fact that Subaru-hime's appearance looked as young as the twenty-year-old Fujimori-sensei.

"Ienari the Fool pushed onto mine father the responsibility for the acts of ineptitude that he and his council of elders hadst committed, forcing him into light exile. In the land whither he wast undergoing house arrest, mine father apparently ranneth afoul of the Tengu Kakushi."

"Light… exile?"

"Hath thou heard of details of what hath happened after his disappearance thither?"

"…No, unfortunately. The only events I know of from that period are… aah…" Touya scratched his head with a grown. "…At most, things like the revenge of the Forty-Seven Ronin… Wait, that's from a different era."

"I see. Well, never mind, I doth not particularly care. Well, I doth has't a little bit of lingering attachment, but, well, never mind."

"I'm sorry."

After looking down at the land beneath the castle with downcast eyes, Subaru pulled herself back together and once more turned to fix her gaze on Touya.

"Even if thou are a criminal, that dost not make thee mean or servile. The laws of the shogunate don't reacheth hither either. Of course, it depends greatly on how shameful and wretched the crime is, but… ah, that's right."

Out of the blue, the witch left her seat, and when she came back, she was holding a familiar sword in her hands.

"My sword…!"

Touya reflexively stood up, and the witch nodded.

"As I thought."

The witch unsheathed the sword and examined the blade as she held it aloft.

"I has't never seen forging so complete and pure. This is an excellent blade."

As Touya faced the witch with the sword between them, he couldn't help but tensely recall what had happened at the graveyard.

He still couldn't believe this was the same person as back then.

Noticing Touya's anxious face, the witch softened her expression and re-sheathed the blade with another graceful motion.

"A blade is a warrior's soul. Never separate it from thy person."

Saying that, she held out the handle to Touya.

"You're giving it back?"

"Thou bethink 'tis careless of me—? But this blade doest not carryeth the scent of blood."

"…No. Thank you very much."

Touya respectfully accepted his sword.

The witch nodded in satisfaction and returned to her seat.

However, she next spoke in a despondent manner.

"I hath found that blade during mine morning stroll, but… mine clan's graveyard wast terribly damaged by beasts."

Touya froze in shocked as he was searching for someplace to put down his sword.

"This castle and the region around it art within the domain of the wolves. On rare occasion, beasts that might be huge enough to destroy gravestones doth creep into this domain to steal crops from the fields, but…"

Her sad expression was unbearable to watch.

'The damage was caused by your magic'… Unable to say the truth, Touya didn't know how to console her. What if she eventually revealed her terrifying witch persona again—it would be a lie to say that he wasn't anxious about that.

Even so, his feelings of pity for her didn't change.

"I'll help you clean up and repair the graves."

"…I see, thank you. Tis a difficult job for the puppets, and Suzuran is too much of an unruly child for it."

Subaru-hime chewed on pickled vegetables while gazing at the beautiful mountain surface.

Suddenly, she turned to Touya and asked a question.

"By the way, Touya, has't thou heard of Otoshibanashi?"

"Otoshibanashi…?"

"'Tis also called Rakugo[7]. Has't thou ever seen a performance of it?"

"Rakugo? Y-Yeah, I've a bit of experience with it." Though he had only seen it once or twice on television.

"How unexpected. Suzuran keepeth pestering me to perform for her. I has't already performed all the ones I hath learned from mine father. Hath thither been any new stories?"

"You perform Rakugo?"

"Indeed—"

Rolling up her sleeves, Subaru took out a folding fan affixed with transparent weaving from the sleeve to the wooden frame, and took a very Rakugo-like storytelling pose as she began to speak.

"Eh~, goldfishes, goldfishes, three goldfishes, the middle goldfish, the pop-eyed goldfish. Heavenly gods, three heavenly gods, the first heavenly god's nose is chipped, the middle heavenly god is a good god. The tiger roars, the tiger roars, the tiger roars so much. The puppy~ snorts~. I wast originally the same. If I goeth to the pine grove where I parted with thee, shalt the pine's dew fall or will mine tears? Ajurakamokuren, kyuuraisu, tekerettsunopa[8]."

Subaru finished by spreading out her arms.

"……"

Touya stiffened in place, wondering what had just happened.

Cough.

Subaru cleared her throat a little and corrected her sitting posture.

"…M-Mine father liked Rakugo. Apparently, he wast even carrying a Rakugo book when he befell upon the Tengu Kakushi. Whenever I hath grown tired during mine training and studies in mine childhood, he would speaketh much about Rakugo and perform them for me."

"You memorized all the stories from the Rakugo book?"

"Indeed. 'Twas unexpectedly useful. That girl is the type to easily grow bored… Yes. 'Twas right by this window…"

Subaru nostalgically gazed down at the table.

"If it's just telling you Rakugo stories, then that's pretty easy. Unfortunately, I don't remember any myself, but I could show you lots of Rakugo books after I go back—"

"Go back…?"

Suddenly, Subaru's expression darkened.

Touya felt a chill run down his back.

In the end, Suzuran didn't come back to the castle—

So Subaru and Touya went to repair the graveyard by themselves.

Though he did honestly want to help with the repair work, Touya's greater priority was to persuade Subaru and Suzuran to let him bring the little girl back to Earth.

After Touya and Subaru walked down the castle's stone steps, a white wolf appeared before them.

"……!"

Subaru calmly stepped forward.

"No need to be afraid. This is Yukiwarimaru. He's the leader of the wolves that have served mine family for generations. Yukiwarimaru is the one who found Suzuran in the woods as well."

"Yukiwari…?"

That particular word sounded familiar to Touya.

"—However, that girl hath never been able to get rid of her habit of reading the kanji for Yukiwari as Sekkachi, and keepeth calling him Sekkachimaru all the time. Yukiwarimaru is also troubled by it, right?"

Upon having its name called, the wolf gazed at Subaru with deep reddish brown eyes.

Human and beast.

With the mistress of the castle standing between them, Touya and Yukiwarimaru gazed warily at each other.

Touya's sword wasn't on his waist. Right now, he was only carrying the bamboo basket containing work tools. After careful consideration, Touya had decided to leave the sword back at the castle.

He looked with complicated feelings at the wolf's tough body, whose muscles undulated beneath its white fur every time it walked.

"…He has a grey spot on his brow, hence the name Yukiwari[a]… huh?"

"Indeed. Thou art quite perceptive."

"It comes from the name of the mealy primrose… right?"

"Indeed. The mealy primrose is connected with mine family motto."

"—Family motto, huh?"

Touya gulped at the creeping hunch that was starting to grow in him.

The two of them now stood before the rows of damaged graves.

Subaru sighed with her hands on her hips.

"They really didst a number on this place. I doth not even know whither to start."

Touya looked over the disastrous scene as well.

"Are all the people buried here Nutellans?"

"Nutellans?"

"Ah, no, err—I mean, were they all native people who lived in this land?"

"The name 'Nutellan' hast a strange ring to it… Mine father called them the People of Sagacity. Of course, there art ancestors of mine family buried hither as well."

"The People of Sagacity? So they all lived and died at the castle."

"…No."

Subaru shook her head.

"Since I becameth old enough to beeth aware of mine surroundings, the only ones who has't been newly buried in this soul garden art mine mother and father. I hath only heard about the deceased sleeping in the other graves through hearsay and hath never met them directly."

"……"

Touya was once more hit by an inexplicable feeling, because he couldn't believe that those were the words of someone like her who had lived for many, many years in this land.

If that was really true, for just how long had she lived all alone—?

"Mine mother wast the daughter of the village chief. The People of Sagacity art naturally long-lived, but my mother wast unfortunately born weak in body. She died when I was very young.

I only recall a little of her face."

"…That must have been lonely for you."

"'Tis fine. I hadst mine father. The People of Sagacity who hath lived at the castle left and went on a journey to a faraway land."

Subaru knelt before a gravestone and picked up a damaged flower with her fingertips.

"Where did they go?"

"…That hast nothing to doth with thee."

Subaru replied without turning around, the coldness of her tone confusing Touya.

Her back seemed to be clearly telling him 'I don't want to answer that'.

"In any case, several hundred years has't already passed since then. Mine father remained in this land. Because he loved this land whither he lived with mine mother. I feel the same way as well, even now—"

Placing the flower on her knee, Subaru ran a finger along the very Japanese-like gravestone that Homura and Touya had noticed before.

"I personally engraved the words mine father hath left behind on this gravestone. I hadst plenty of time to do so, anyway."

"Then… you've been here all alone ever since then…"

Touya was rendered speechless.

Subaru continued to stare at her parents' gravestones, seeming in low spirits.

Resolving himself, Touya decided to ask her the big question.

"Subaru-hime. I have a request."

"What is it?"

The witch quietly asked back without turning around.

"It's true that I came here from Japan, from Earth. That goes the same for that girl—for Suzuran. I probably know her birth and parentage."

"Thou art making a marriage proposal just after meeting her? Thou art quite hasty."

"No, not that, I mean that I didn't come here through Tengu Kakushi."

"Hoh."

"Suzuran has a family. You're definitely her family as well, but her true family is on Earth. I want to bring Suzuran back to Earth."

After a short silence, Subaru touched the flower on her knee with her fingertip.

"I thought it wast something like that. However…"

The witch murmured dispassionately.

"Those whom chance upon the Tengu Kakushi only experience misfortune when they try to returneth to their homeland. If thou say that is not the case for thee, thou can returneth to Earth or wherever thou like. But please doth not tread upon this land ever again."

"……But Suzuran—"

"Suzu is mine daughter. She is mine only daughter, who I personally fed and raised since she wast a baby."

"……"

As the witch quietly stood up and turned around, the flower in her hand swiftly wilted before Touya's eyes.

"Thou likely has't already noticed, but the flow of time hither is different from Earth. 'Tis a cruel providence. Even if she wast someone's true child, they would no longer beest able to recognize her."

"That's not true. Homura realized it! Her true mother surely will too."

"Even so, would that bringeth happiness to Suzu? Can thou promise that Suzuran would not cry after being taken far away from these familiar hills and fields and from the wolves she wast raised with like siblings?"

The wilted flower broke apart and scattered from her fingertips.

"…I don't know."

The witch sneered as her expectations came true.

"The misfortune hath already occurred. It hath already passed. Therefore, what more is thither to seek?"

"That's just your own opinion—It's something for Suzuran to decide for herself."

“She is still just a small child.”

Subaru’s gaze became sharp like knives.

“Why did you remain here? Did your father wish for you to stay here?”

“…Kuh… Silence.”

“Subaru-hime, it’s because you yourself chose to do so.”

Even as his heart was pained by her history, Touya continued to speak.

“I don’t believe that your father wished for you to remain all alone. Even if you stayed here until you finished caring for your father’s father, why didn’t you go and look for the People of Sagacity—your irreplaceable comrades.”

“—Silence.”

“Please understand. Entrusting your feelings to Suzuran as well is too cruel.”

Not faltering before the witch’s angry gaze, Touya spoke resolutely.

“You became alone by your own choice. You overlooked your living comrades and chose those who had already died. The ones who miss you aren’t your dead parents, but your comrades. Even now, somewhere out there, they’re surely still thinking of you, Subaru.”

“Silence! Do not utter another word!”

“____”

Touya realized that he had become unable to speak words with his mouth, just as the witch had ordered.

Not only that, his entire body was starting to rapidly turn numb.

“Do not bring calamity hither from outside this land.”

A green flow appeared and wavered between the witch’s fingers.

The witch’s eyes glowed ominously as she stared down at him, causing Touya’s consciousness to promptly black out.

Chapter 20 END

1 Ani-san and Oanii-san are older renditions of Onii-san (older brother). This is indicative of the older dialect of Japanese that Suzu and the witch usually speak, though Suzu’s way of speaking is less overtly archaic and more informal than the witch’s, so I make the translation of her speech come out closer to modern speaking in order to accentuate the difference.

2 Hime: Japanese word for “Princess”, but Suzu says it rather informally and doesn’t attach the usual respectful suffixes to it, so it’s used more like a name/nickname than a title in this case.

3 In English, this translates to “Princess Iotsumisumaru”. Here, the title “hime” (princess) is used a bit differently than in English. In ancient Japan, the title was frequently added to the last names of noble women from the time of their birth as a suffix, to the point where it was more like a natural part of their names than a separate title.

4 Haori: a traditional Japanese sort of hip- or thigh-length kimono-like jacket, worn over other clothing.

5 Here, a different word for “puppet” is used than the one that Touya has been using, which more specifically refers to “a puppet controlled by others” than the more general term meaning “a human-like doll/figure”.

6 Shogun: literally means “general”, but it is specifically used as the title for the (usually hereditary) military dictator of Japan who ruled behind the symbolic status of the emperor, a system of government that was maintained from 1192 to 1867.

7 Rakugo: a traditional form of Japanese storytelling, performed by a professional storyteller through only their words and gestures, most often with comic elements. Otoshibashi is an older name for it.

8 Sorry if this all seems nonsensical, Rakugo storytelling sometimes uses a very different form of grammar and language compared to normal Japanese, and I’m not well-versed in it enough to give it a satisfactory English translation. The three nonsensical words at the end in particular have no real meaning as far as I can tell and are there only for stylistic purposes.

9 Yukiwari: means “breaking through frozen snow to reveal the ground”. It also refers to the Yukiwari in Yukiwarisou (the Hepatica flower, otherwise known as the mealy primrose).

Chapter 21

Homura had just finished using the Exploration Club's shower room.

The instant she returned to the changing room with a towel wrapped around her, she was suddenly hit by intense exhaustion.

After looking at herself in the mirror and letting out a big yawn, she suddenly looked to the side and saw Misasagi-senpai sitting on a bench near the wall.

"…Senpai, are your injuries okay?"

Senpai managed to nod, but Homura couldn't bear to see her brooding expression.

Though apprehensive, Homura abruptly sat down in the chair next to Misasagi-senpai.

"Ah, right, right. I forgot I was still carrying the Transport Ring… Here, I'll give it back."

Misasagi raised her head when Homura tried to give back the ring, but placed her palm over Homura's fingers and shook her head.

"I no longer, have the right, to take that."

"Senpai… please don't say something like that."

There was no longer any sign of the decisive senpai who had slapped Homura's cheek before.

"When you slapped me, I was surprised and resented you a little, but now I understand that you were thinking of my safety… You weren't mistaken, senpai."

Senpai's sorrowful expression eased a little at Homura's words. However—

"…Hinooka-san, please, take this—"

Instead of taking the ring which was the proof of her being the club president, senpai took out something herself, a jewel which emitted a familiar green glow, and held it out to Homura.

"This is… a spirit stone? Why are you giving it to me?"

"Please take care, of Touya-kun."

"…Eh, wait, senpai?"

"This is, a quasi-third-ranked spirit stone, which I've kept on me, ever since I found it, in some ruins. It should, protect you, Hinooka-san."

"What are you talking about…?"

Homura reflexively drew closer to senpai in a reproachful manner.

"Senpai, for me, having you yourself with us is far more reassuring than any stone or ring—"

Bang!

At that instant, the door to the changing room was slammed opened, revealing Kamikoma, completely prepared with her rescue equipment.

"Now then, Hinooka Homura of the Seiran High Exploration Club! Sorry to do this when you've just finished your bath and you're taking a breather with an expression of relief after a day's hard work, but I have another job for you!"

Having that suddenly declared one-sidedly to her despite the fact that she hadn't even finished changing yet, Homura was greatly startled.

"Huh, ehe? Umm, umm, u-u-umm, I've been awake for a whole day and haven't had a chance to sleep well, so I'm really on the verge of collapsing here—"

"Sorry, but you'll have to rest over on Nutella. There's no time."

Kamikoma crossed her arms, the very image of a demon to Homura.

"I have to put those mud-caked clothes back on?"

"That issue has already been taken care of!"

Ameno appeared from behind Kamikoma and raised her hands with a dramatic flair.

In her hands was a fresh set of Homura's Exploration Club uniform which had been meticulously prepared. Thus the second demon had appeared.

"Homura-san is the only one who can save Takumi-san! It's really making me fired up~. It's a romance that's crossed beyond space-time~"

"W-What are you saying, Ame-chan!? W-What about contacting our families!?"

As the two demons forcefully captured Homura and changed her clothes, her consciousness gradually faded away.

—Homura woke with a start.

"Hah… so it was… a dream…"

Homura opened her eyes as she felt a rhythmic vibration.

"…No, I guess it wasn't a dream."

"That was a long nap you had."

"—!?"

After Homura grumbled to herself half-awake, Kamikoma called out to her brightly.

Taga was dashing across grasslands beneath the reflected light of the Bagel at night.

Homura and Kamikoma were sitting on each of his shoulders as odd-looking passengers.

Taga was also carrying a huge frame inside a sack on his back.

"I see… Uuuh, I can't believe I've made a complete round trip with barely any break all by myself…"

"Hey, we're here too, you know."

"That's true, but…"

Homura took out and grasped the charm from her chest pocket. Inside it, she could definitely feel the spirit stone that senpai had given her.

But even so, she didn't feel reassured at all.

Even though the dream she'd witnessed just now had been very extreme, it was pretty much the same as what had happened in reality. Feelings of resentment that she still couldn't get rid of lurked in her heart.

"Haaah," Homura sighed.

Setting that aside—she turned her attention to the Hiyoshizaka High Exploration Club members.

Homura couldn't help but be awed by Taga's power and stamina as he ran like a land cruiser while easily carrying both Kamikoma and Homura on his shoulders.

As for Kamikoma, she was fiddling with her lute and eagerly playing with its accompanying peg as she was rocked and shaken with Taga's every movement.

"Taichi, run a bit more smoothly. I can't tune it properly like this."

And she even ended up saying things like that.

"Come on, Koma-senpai. You're asking the unreasonable."

"It's not unreasonable. I've even cooked on top of the Taichi-car in the past. Things like curry."

"That way of thinking itself is unreasonable, you know!? Taga-senpai, you say something too!"

"……"

However, the man in question simply maintained his reliable running pace while wearing a carefree smile on his hairy face.

"…Well, I'm not one to talk flippantly either when I'm allowed to relax on your shoulders like this, but…"

At the end of her sentence, Homura quietly muttered to herself, "Is Taga-senpai a man of bottomless generosity?"

Ignoring Homura's bafflement, Kamikoma played on her lute a slightly sad melody that suited these grasslands at night.

The melody wasn't just pleasing to the ears, but also seemed to sink into Homura's body and gently adjust the rhythm of her breath and heartbeat, making her exhaustion mysteriously lessen.

It appeared that the reason why Homura was able to rest and nap in this absurd position was largely due to Kamikoma's magic.

Glancing at Kamikoma from the corner of her eye, Homura listened attentively to her lute playing.

"…Koma-senpai, umm, you use dodeca-model magic, right? I heard your class was bard, though."

"Oui[1]. As you can see—"

She began to play a different melody on the lute while humming, and pale lights that resembled fireflies flowed out from her fingertips and were carried off by the wind. It appeared to be a type of illumination magic.

"Wow, so pretty… But why don't you use a saxophone?"

"—A saxophone would also work just as well. As long it can make a melody with a twelve-tone equal temperament based on Pythagorean tuning, any instrument would work. However, the saxophone has major disadvantages when using it for practical application in the Exploration Club."

"Hah."

"First of all—when I blow the saxophone, I can't give directions to others."

"Ah."

"Second, I get really tired if I keep blowing it for a long time."

"I see. That's true."

"Therefore, I gave up on using the saxophone and chose an instrument based on, well, my personal tastes from the various acoustic instruments with moderate sound range."

"That makes sense."

Homura fervently nodded in admiration.

Just like with the communication device, the options of usable equipment seemed to be bottle-necked by the battery.

However, Kamikoma was making a sour expression. The melody she was playing also seemed to become more solemn and grave…

"But now I regret having chosen the lute…" Kamikoma spat out reproachfully.

"Isn't it a bit late for that?"

"But a lute is super bulky and unwieldy, you know? And tuning it is way too much of a pain. Even Goethe complained about it, right? He said that he wasted half of his life on tuning his lute."

"I… like it."

Taga, who had been silently sticking to his role as a rally car, suddenly murmured that.

"Hey, what're you saying, you damn Pajero[2]?"

Kamikoma hit her junior club member's head.

"W-Well, perhaps because it takes so much work to take care of it, it's strangely very compatible with magic, though."

Kamikoma once more began to play a soothing melody.

From Homura's point of view, both Kamikoma and Taga were far too calm, making it impossible to tell that they were heading to the castle of a dangerous witch.

Even though, if they tried to not only save Touya, but also bring back that problematic wolf girl, a fierce battle with the witch might be awaiting them in the worst case scenario—

Nevertheless, it was true that Homura felt encouraged by their calmness.

"Senpai is terrible…" Homura murmured with a sigh.

"…Hmm?"

"I mean how she abdicated her responsibility to me… using the excuse that I'm more familiar with the route to get there."

"……"

Taga also glanced at Homura as she waved her legs in dissatisfaction.

"It's true that I'm also worried about Touya-kun, but she didn't have to push all responsibility on me one-sidedly like that. The things I'm capable of doing are really limited."

"…Don't say it like that."

As Homura pouted, Kamikoma chided her candidly.

"Unlike Mayo who was unconscious when the wolves came and took her away, you were able to ascertain the surrounding terrain, so I think bringing you as our guide is logical. Well, it's also because there's the chance that we might get stranded here ourselves if we make even one misstep on this rescue mission."

"In that case…!"

"However, she's not being excluded from this mission just because of her injuries. It would be a bad idea to bring Mayo to Nutella when she's in that state."

"……"

Still unconvinced, Homura angrily turned away to stare ahead in the direction they were heading.

Kamikoma's gaze turned soft and mature as she looked at Homura.

"She needs time. Time to heal her wounds. This alone… is something that not even my lute can heal."

Despite those words, Homura remained absent-minded.

"…Is senpai going to quit at this rate?"

Homura hunched down forlornly. Tears gradually gathered at the corner of her eyes.

"For her to give up being an investigator… that's too unfair. After she said things like having a persistent fighting spirit… and a heart that never falters…"

"……"

Kamikoma played the melody for illumination magic and made the glowing orb that appeared stay fixed above her shoulder. She then strapped her lute to her back and took out a map from her pocket.

She checked and confirmed their route while squinting at the mountains illuminated by the moon and the Bagel.

Then, as she stored the map back away, she finally spoke up.

"…Mori-chan may have said those kinds of things, but she surely believes in Mayo. She's known Mayo for far longer than I have, since she was little. Mori-chan knows that she's not the kind of person to give up that easily. Of course, I also believe in Mayo."

"But senpai ran away."

Kamikoma stared fixedly at Homura over Taga's head.

She was making the same serious and solemn expression as the time she'd spoken about Kujou.

"Everyone has some weakness in them. None of us are perfect. We manage to get through it by supporting each other. If you can't acknowledge and accept that weakness, you'll eventually end up all alone."

"……All alone…"

"It'll be okay. Mayo will definitely recover and get back on her feet—when that time comes, please be there by her side, Homura. Along with that rascal Touya."

Chapter 21 END

1 Oui: French for "yes". Kamikoma tends to use multilingual phrases like this often.

2 Pajero: referring to the Mitsubishi car model of that name.

Chapter 22

The cold fog pervading the forest brushed against Homura's cheeks, flush with tension, and stole the warmth from them.

It felt like it was even surreptitiously stealing away the courage she had managed to muster.

—They were just about to reach the witch's valley.

Though they weren't yet close enough to hear the echoes of the waterfall, their surroundings had already become familiar terrain for Homura.

Three days had passed on Nutella time since Homura and Misasagi's escape from this land.

Homura and the others had once more plunged into the witch's valley on a forced march, not even giving themselves time to sleep.

Just in case Touya had managed to successfully escape capture, they had briefly stopped by the destroyed Seiran High base camp and the encampment Homura and Touya had set up in the rocky area, leaving behind messages and a minimal amount of necessities such as food at each location while they were at it. Unfortunately, they had found no traces that Touya had been at any of those locations, and so they had continued on to the witch's valley.

"…It feels like rain could fall at any moment…"

Homura peeked at the sky through the spaces between the broadleaf branches above her.

The current time should have been just past noon, but it was already as dark as evening. The fog, which had been cleared away when she last visited here, was now blocking her entire field of vision.

Though that fog did make Homura and the others uneasy, it was also convenient since it helped hide their presence as they moved.

Walking at the head of their group, Kamikoma spoke up in a low voice.

"From here on, we'll do exactly as we discussed last night. If we end up in battle, don't get close to Taichi. Listen, make sure you don't no matter what. This is an order."

"You've told me that several times already… By the way, what are you capable of doing in a fight, Koma-senpai?"

Kamikoma smiled smugly.

"A bard's abilities are basically all-purpose, capable of adapting to any situation."

"Haah."

"My only weak point is—doing things quietly, I guess."

"Isn't that no good in this situation? You're completely unsuited to covert activities, aren't you?"

"Muh, you have a point. Also, I have a hard time running away from pursuers as a bard."

"Can you really call yourself all-purpose like that…?" Homura asked doubtfully.

"No prob, we'll be leaving all the direct fighting to Taichi anyway."

Puffing up her chest proudly as if she were lauding herself, Kamikoma looked back over her shoulder, and Taga firmly nodded and pulled out his personal equipment from the sack on his back.

He equipped on his arms a giant pair of overwhelmingly thick and heavy bear claws[1]—a form of close-quarters weapons also known gauntlet claws—which extended from their folded-up state with a clang.

Combined with the attached metal arm guards which extended up to his elbows, it made for a pair of specialized weapons that combined offense and defense in one.

These were dynamic weapons that, with Taga's giant build, made it seem as if he could blow away Homura's body with a single swing, making the harsh warning not to get near him understandable.

Homura gulped at the sight of those dully shining claw tips.

"…I know full well that close-quarters combat is dangerous… but still, I have magic. I was even able to make a barrier against one of the witch's fireballs!"

"Seriously? But it really is dangerous, you know? Stick close to me as much as possible, and if you can't, go hide in the rear behind the frontlines."

"But then there's no point in having me here!"

"Just guiding us was more than enough. Thanks to you, we managed to get here without getting lost. And you worked hard on cooking our rice too."

Coming to a stop, Kamikoma turned back to face Homura.

"Listen well, Homura. I'm saying this seriously; avoid any fighting. Our top priority is to rescue Touya Takumi."

"O-Of course—but please, don't forget that little girl either."

"……"

Homura recalled what she had heard just before they had departed for Nutella:

The detailed report provided from the authorities which Ameno had recounted to them.

The missing baby was a year and one month old at the time. An investigation was started under the assumption of a kidnapping.

Three months after the baby's disappearance, a pair of criminals who were arrested in a drunk-driving accident in a separate incident emerged as the kidnapper suspects.

The suspects were an elderly married couple, and they confessed to kidnapping out of a desire for a child.

However, long before their confession, when long term restrictions of news on the incident was being imposed, information on the police's investigation unexpectedly managed to get on the internet through the people that the detectives had interviewed. As a result, the leaked information reached the suspects themselves and, out of fear of public attention, the couple abandoned the child deep in the mountains during winter.

Though a large-scale search was conducted in the specified region, the child was never found.

From clues such as strands of hair discovered in the suspects' home, the certainty of their guilt was confirmed. However, the male suspect of the couple, who had been personally responsible for abandoning the child in the wild, was attacked by a nervous disorder soon afterwards, and the defence appealed that the abandonment of the child was a mistaken assertion by the suspects. Thus, the case was currently being treated as a double missing person's incident.

The baby's mother, not trusting the suspects' confession, believed it to be a lie and had started her own independent search.

If, immediately after the baby was abandoned in the mountains, she was transported to Nutella through some means, it would match Homura's eyewitness testimony of the girl having grown to the age of twelve or thirteen.

However, neither Kamikoma nor Taga gave an immediate reply to Homura's words.

It wasn't like they didn't understand Homura's sincere wish to rescue the missing child, but…

"…Rescuing her will be difficult if she takes hostile action towards us. The Transport Ring doesn't work well if the person doesn't wish to be transported. It greatly lowers the odds of successful transport."

"Ugh…"

Recalling her earlier return to Earth, which was no better than a rushed emergency landing, Homura winced and faltered.

Even so, every time she recalled that girl, it brought up the memory of that woman who continued to wait at that station entrance even now.

"I'll convince her. She treated senpai's injuries. She may be rough and wild, but she's not a bad girl. If we could just properly talk with her—"

If they could just get her to listen to their explanation of the events that had befallen her and brought her here.

If they could eventually teach her the common sense and rules of modern Japan.

Even if it would be a mountain of work, Homura wouldn't budge on this.

"Still, I don't think you'll be able to communicate with those wolves. Rather, this guy here would probably be better suited for that."

Kamikoma gave her lute a few hard taps. Homura wondered if the reason it got out of tune so easily was because she treated it so roughly.

"T-That's why I'm asking for your help here, Koma-senpai."

"Hey, hey. And there's also the witch to consider."

Kamikoma kept a watchful eye on their surroundings, never lowering her guard.

"Frankly speaking, the witch is an opponent that's out of our league. The two of us have had experience in magic battles against hostile beasts at most."

"Yeah, Misasagi-senpai mentioned that there were rare beasts like that."

"This will be our first time fighting a human. Actually, no investigator has ever fought one before. We have a manual for making peaceful contact, but no one ever imagined a case like this."

"My club's advisor is quite laissez-faire, though… What about your advisor Professor Tanakura?"

At that question, Taga was the one to speak up for once.

"—Don't be impatient. Don't think of forcing others to change. Wait for the right chance."

Kamikoma nodded in agreement.

"…Taga-senpai really talks like a missionary, doesn't he?"

"But he's right. This will turn into a long mission that requires patience. It might not even end in our generation and take several decades to complete."

"No way…"

Homura was flabbergasted by the scale of Kamikoma's prediction.

"We're lucky just for the fact that we can communicate with the people here. That alone is amazing enough to be considered a miracle."

"Then—we'll manage to get through to them somehow! Right?"

As Homura sought agreement, Taga made a troubled expression.

"…Homura, you're really incredible, you know that?"

The two senpais laughed in disbelief.

In the end, they crept further into the valley without Homura being able to completely rid herself of her ill feelings towards Misasagi-senpai.

Relying on a river that seemed to lead towards the waterfall as a guide within the thick fog, they advanced deeper into the valley.

Their path was in the exact opposite direction of the route she had taken with Touya before, but there were more intact remains of what appeared to have been a stone-paved road. This seemed to be the proper path to reach the castle.

In other words, they were heading straight towards the witch's castle.

The three of them hid their main equipment further back away from the castle in order to move more easily and quickly.

"I hope we don't run into another trap…"

"You mean that magic-detecting bomb that hit Mayo? Yeah, I agree with you there…"

"……"

Taga silently bent his back and presented his wide shoulders to Kamikoma.

“Huh, ride on you? No, it’s fine. We’re about to prepare for battle. We should each move on our own two feet.”

As Taga made a worried expression that didn’t suit his large body, Kamikoma smacked his arm to soothe him, looking like the very image of an upperclassman as she did so.

“Homura, you too. Use your magic as sparsely and efficiently as possible. The two of us can’t protect you now.”

“Understood.”

Her face tightening with tension, Homura double-checked the tear gas spray hanging from her hip.

When the sound of the waterfall finally neared and they’d gotten close enough to start seeing the castle—Taga grabbed the two girls’ shoulders to stop them.

“…!”

There was a person standing alone ahead of them on the moss-covered, stone-paved road.

It was a barefoot girl.

Kamikoma instinctively bent forward in preparation for a fight.

“Is that the witch—? Guess not. The missing child, right?”

“Yes.”

Homura nodded, and then she tried to step forward, but Kamikoma stopped her.

“H-Hey.”

“We’re in luck. We have a better chance of talking with that girl than the witch.”

Even so, Homura was clearly nervous.

“……”

The young girl wearing a blue kimono, Suzuran, looked over the three of them with a cautious gaze.

She widened her eyes in apparent surprise as she looked up at Taga’s huge body and quickly went on guard.

“So you brought comrades with you…”

“Thank goodness you’re here. I was worried that—”

When Homura tried to approach her, Suzuran suddenly glared at her.

“I won’t reproach any of you. So please leave and go back where you came from.”

“Eh?”

“Hime isn’t normal right now. And I can’t hold back the wolves anymore either.”

“…Hime? Hey, wait, we came to meet you and—”

“Leave!”

Shaking off Homura, Suzuran jumped several steps back, and the fog parted to suddenly reveal the white tip of a nose.

It was the huge white wolf, Yukiwarimaru. It appeared out of nowhere, as if the fog itself had condensed and formed it in an instant.

“—!”

Taga put himself on guard as he stood facing Yukiwarimaru, whose body was just as huge as his own.

Jumping onto the wolf’s back, Suzuran shouted.

“Sekkachimaru says you people smell. It’s that ring of yours. And not just that. You also have stones of power. You damn thieves!”

“Wait! What about Touya-kun!? What happened to the boy who remained behind here!?”

“You mean Takumi? You should give up on him at this point.”

“Ah, hey! Wait! Is Hime the witch!?”

“Step back, Homura.”

Just like their arrival, their departure was also like that of a mirage—

The white wolf and girl suddenly turned around and left and Homura watched their departure unhappily. The howling of wolves reached her ears.

Homura noticed that Kamikoma, standing beside her with her lute ready, was now smiling boldly.

"…Koma-senpai?"

"It's time to rampage, Taichi."

"Roger," Taga replied.

"Senpai. Saving Touya-kun takes priority. We should avoid conflict as much as possible—"

"It can't be helped now that it's come to this. Rather, this was within the bounds of our predictions, you know♪"

Kamikoma's fingers moved to the twelve strings arranged in six courses on her lute and began to play a solemn melody.

Each tune, amplified by magic and resonating with the surrounding space, pierced Homura's body like a heavy wedge.

The skin all over her body thrummed and became keen and sensitive, a feeling similar to the instant of transportation.

Grey wolves sluggishly appeared from within the fog while growling.

"Homura, cover me."

Kamikoma sharply gave Homura directions while concentrating on her magic.

"Y-Yes!"

This is the battle march of a Bard—! Homura murmured to herself mentally.

She was surprised as she felt her fear lessen and her discernment sharpen even with so many enemies facing them. She was filled with a sense of exaltation and enhancement she had never felt before, greatly expanding her field of vision.

Taga stood firmly in front of the two girls like a wall to protect them.

The wolves, which the little girl had said that she could no longer restrain, drooled saliva and approached with vacant gazes as if they were infected with rabies.

"……"

For an instant, Homura absently thought that she was lucky to have already taken her rabies vaccine shot, but she changed her thinking when she saw the wolves' fangs.

As the wolves began to surround them in a circle, Homura readied the spray can in her hands.

Then, she heard an even more ominous growling than the others. And it was coming not from the wolves, but from Taichi in front of her.

With a clank, the folded claws on his hands extended out.

Not ending his battle preparations there, his hair then seemed to bristle noisily, and a visible change came over Taga's body.

Taga now looked like the kind of caricature bear that appeared in the nightmares of infants.

He had become a half-human, half-bear monster.

His howl shook the forest, and Homura's body froze in shock.

"He's gone into Were-Form[4]."

At the same time, the melody that Kamikoma was playing became deeper and graver.

In fact, it acted as a pressure over the rampaging berserker by holding back his surging power.

"Don't show any hostility. He'll attack even allies in this state."

"Hiii, what is this!?"

One of the wolves, having been agitated by fear, forgot its hunting instincts as part of the pack and jumped at Taga's neck by itself.

—With a flash, his claws seized the wolf's body from the side and then hurled it far over the treetops.

Howling together, the rest of the wolves then jumped at him one after another like a dam had burst.

The berserker knocked down the wolves one by one as he tore off the stone paving and ripped them apart along with nearby tree trunks.

However, the wolves, attacking craftily by each aiming for Taga's blind spots while surrounding him, managed to steadily deal wounds to him.

As she stood to protect Kamikoma behind her, Homura immediately emptied two canisters of tear gas to repel the wolves which came to approach them and pulled off the safety pin of her spare canister while she was at it.

"*Cough, cough*."

She coughed and her eyes watered at the intense stimulation of the bits of spray that drifted towards her on the wind.

Even so, the tear gas worked well at its purpose, making several wolves lose the will to fight the moment it hit their nostrils.

The ten-odd wolves present had their numbers halved in a short time.

"*Cough*, we can do this, Koma-senpai."

"……"

Kamikoma nodded as she concentrated on playing her lute, seeming to control Taga with her fingers on the strings.

However—

"…Ah… Taichi!"

Taga suddenly looked up from glaring at the wolves.

A silhouette jumped down from the trees and aimed to lop off his head, but Taga managed to cover his upper body with his gauntlets at that very instant.

As Taga grunted fiercely, the silhouette was thrusted away, but managed to quickly stand up from rolling on the ground, revealing itself to be a familiar boy.

"Touya… kun…!?"

"…Damn it… Stop, Taichi! It's Touya!"

Taga stopped for an instant when he heard Kamikoma's restraining shout, but his opponent didn't leave him any time to rest.

It was definitely Touya.

Wielding a long sword and a short sword in his hands, he wordlessly attacked Taga.

Taga had no choice to fight back with a growl.

"Tch!"

Clicking her tongue, Kamikoma changed melodies.

It was a melody of indiscriminate healing that enveloped the entire surrounding area. Naturally, that meant that it healed the enemy wolves as well, but it was the only desperate measure she could choose right now.

"Do something, Homura!"

"What's wrong with you, Touya-kun!? That's Taga-senpai! Stop!"

Ignoring Homura's voice, Touya stoutly devoted himself to attacking, his vigor so great that it even overpowered Taga's huge body.

"It can't be helped. Homura!"

"Sorry!"

Guessing Kamikoma's plan, Homura aimed a spray can at Touya, but then he immediately glared at Homura and bent over before starting to run towards her.

Homura faltered, unable to say anything.

Kamikoma promptly tackled Homura out of the way.

The spray can fell out of Homura's hand and flew through the air while spewing red smoke from its side.

"A-Are you for real, Touya-kun?"

Homura was shocked and became teary-eyed at the sight of Touya's complete change.

After the two girls had fallen to the ground, Touya approached them to finish them off, but Taga pinned him from behind his back and lifted him up.

Touya resisted, but Taga barely managed to maintain and tighten his grip.

Touya's swords fell from his arms to the ground.

The restraint marks left on his wrists and legs were painfully visible.

"All right, don't let him go! Keep going until he faints!"

Though she was shocked from seeing Touya try to stab her and now struggle desperately to escape, Homura stared straight at him in focus.

"Is he being controlled by the witch……?"

"Homura, activate the emergency withdrawal! Hurry!"

Kamikoma pulled Homura to her feet.

"Kamikoma-senpai, that girl said to give up on him. We have to undo the spell on him."

"We can do that after returning to Earth."

"That will probably be too late."

Homura picked up the short sword Touya had dropped.

It was an unfamiliar sword. He had probably received it from the witch.

As the wolves surrounded them from a distance, Homura came to a decision and started to run off towards him.

"Homura! Come back, idiot! Wait, uwah!"

Kamikoma hastily picked up her lute as Taga's foot was about to trample it.

Red-faced from being constricted, Touya had managed to escape from Taga's hands and began attacking him again.

Homura ran intently until she reached the point where the familiar roof of the castle was in view.

The witch was sitting calmly at a table placed in the courtyard in front of the castle.

However, the wolf girl, who Homura had expected to be there, was nowhere in sight.

After catching her breath with her hands on her knees, Homura appealed to the witch.

"Please give Touya-kun back."

The witch spoke dispassionately while glancing over Homura.

"Hoh… The one who hath used Mathematica—"

At first glance, the witch looked as if she was just spending a peaceful afternoon outside. However, her smile was cold and tinged with a dangerous aura.

"I believeth I already gaveth him back."

"What did you do to him?"

"What, thou ask… I greeted him as a guest…"

The witch narrowed her eyes as she recalled what had happened.

"Though I hadst to shut that noisy mouth of his a bit."

"In that case, please return him to normal. You can do that, right?"

The witch quietly stood up from the table.

"It seems thou hadst no intention of acting as a guest from the start… If thou impudently trespass on these castle grounds, thou must obey the master of this place… The wolves art also greatly perplexed."

Homura froze in shock.

The wolves that had chased after Homura arrived to surround the witch.

Her eyes tinged with even deeper madness than before, the witch gazed at the wolves.

Her madness riled up the wolves, and they once more bared their fangs at Homura.

Her hands unconsciously tightened around the short sword she had picked up earlier. However, what on earth could Homura do with a weapon like that?

"You say master… so the only humans here are you and that girl?"

"Thou speaketh of Suzuran? She hath not shown herself around hither the past few days. How deplorable. Perhaps tis because thou has't all been so loud and rambunctious? Dear me…"

She gently pulled up her sleeves.

"Shalt thou also becometh a puppet? Or—"

Lightning danced around the witch's finger.

It was the re-enactment of the lightning attack she had fired at Homura and Touya at the graveyard.

Responding to the hostility in the air, the wolves growled at Homura with bared fangs.

"…"

Homura gulped. She really wanted to run away, but that would just be repeating what happened before.

Restraining her fear and holding her ground, Homura threw the short sword to the ground.

"Suzuran—that's the name you gave that girl. You saved and raised her, right?"

Twitching in unease, the witch glared at Homura with suspicious eyes.

"……"

"My name is Hinooka Homura. I came here from Japan on Earth. Are you the one that Suzuran called Hime…?"

"I am Subaru—Iotsumisumaru no Hime. However, I has't no intention of letting thou calleth me that, nor of remembering thy name."

"Subaru…san. I have a request. Please let Suzuran—"

"I hath said I has't no intention of letting thou calleth me by name," the witch said coldly, interrupting Homura's supplication.

Her golden hair suddenly lifted up and spread out in the air.

The temporarily constrained lightning once more flashed and swirled along her fingertip as she raised her hand overhead.

"Spirit—Copper—"

"Subaru-san… Please listen. You must have a kind heart to have raised Suzuran. We didn't come to steal anything from you or to fight!"

"Then thou must has't cometh hither to die."

—*Flash.*

The witch's red lips pronounced the final word of destruction.

Regretting her own naivety, Homura wasn't able to even stir from where she stood.

"—!"

The magic blast, fired by the witch without bothering to speak any further, cut through the air and struck Homura.

When the retina-burning flash of light receded—Homura was crouching on her knees on the ground, and she raised her head to look at the witch again.

"……Kuh…"

The witch gritted her teeth at the unexpected situation she was confronted with.

"Another counter with Mathematica…? No…"

A thin veil of water had surrounded and protected Homura and was now dispersing into mist.

As an out-of-place burning smell reached her nose, Homura placed a hand to her chest, where the charm around her neck had been scorched and the spirit stone within it was quickly losing its glow.

"This girl… blocked the lightning with a wall of water… using a stone of power…"

The spirit stone, having completely lost its light, cracked and snapped in two on top of Homura's palm.

"Senpai's spirit stone…"

The witch approached Homura.

"Whither didst thou get that stone?"

"This was given to me by senpai—"

"No, no need to even bother asking! Thou got it from a graveyard belonging to the People of Sagacity somewhere. Thou pillaged their graves and stole it! Unforgivable."

"No way… this… is…"

Not knowing the truth of the matter, Homura couldn't deny the accusation.

Even so, she stood up and once more faced the witch.

"Damn thief, if thou dare imperil the sleep of mine ancestors—"

At that moment, a voice called out to the frenzied witch, taking her by surprise.

"Hime…!"

—Were-Form.

The joy and fear of truly appropriating one's body and removing one's shackles to wield power freely.

Even while giving in to his animal instincts and turning into something inhuman, a thread of reason persisted as if frozen in place in the depths of Taga's heart.

In his pin-hole-sized narrow vision was a small swordsman.

No matter how much Taga swung his burly arms and sent the boy flying high in the air—

No matter how much he kicked the boy down against bare rock ground while violently dragging torn tree branches around in the aftermath of his attacks.

The boy, Touya, kept challenging him without paying any attention to his own pain.

He was the embodiment of another kind of madness, different from Taga's.

Taga's howls were strong enough to scatter the fog in the air and make the wolves bristle and falter for an instant, but Touya simply continued to charge at him with glazed eyes.

Their blades repeatedly crossed and slid apart numerous times in the space of just a few seconds as they sought the right angle and balance to overwhelm each other.

When Taga tried to suddenly do a full-body rush with weight equivalent to several tons, Touya shifted the trunk of his body and sidestepped with etched footwork, and even in the midst of that he freely manipulated his blade and slashed like releasing a bow with all the power stored in it.

Not letting his guard down, he dodged the arm bind that immediately followed and jumped back to take some distance.

Readjusting his posture while sensing the heat and dripping life that was running down his chest in great amounts, Taga looked at Touya's wavering eyes.

Reflected in Touya's eyes was a figure that was both Taga and yet not Taga, the fear that slept at the depths of Touya's heart—such an illusion was overlaid in his eyes.

Taga understood that instant impression he felt in those eyes that was hard to put into words. He understood that that illusion wouldn't disappear and was tormenting Touya.

Even if Taga was defeated here, that illusion wouldn't fade and would project onto Touya's vision of Kamikoma behind him and even Homura, acting as a curse that endlessly spurred him to fight his perceived enemy—

Such a sorrowful end was the one thing that Taga would never allow to happen.

Chapter 22 END

1 Bear Claws/Gauntlet Claws: They're claws like the kind Wolverine has, but attached to gauntlets/gloves you place over your hands.

2 Were-Form: the kanji beneath this English word reads "Berserker transformation".

Chapter 23

Jumping down from the back of the white wolf, the young girl approached the witch and desperately clung to her.

"Please stop, please just stop it already, Hime."

"Suzu."

"There's no need to care about these guys. We can just make them go away. Just please return to your usual self, Hime."

"……"

The witch silently looked at the pleading Suzu, an expression of bewilderment on her face. Homura called out to Suzuran.

"—Eri-chan."

"……?"

At that instant, Suzuran seem to unconsciously react to those words, and she turned to look back at Homura.

"Eri-chan. You have the name Suzuran now, right? I won't tell you to give that name up. But your real name is Ono Erika. Your mama called you Eri-chan."

"What are you… Stop it…"

Suzuran vexingly tried to brush away the small feelings that were starting to bubble up inside her.

"I don't know you! Ever since you people came, Hime has become strange. Just disappear from here already! Leave me and Hime alone!"

Suzuran pushed Homura away.

Even so, Homura didn't stop calling out to her.

"That thing on your arm, yes, that—you've worn it and cherished it all this time, right? That was given to you by your mama."

Taken aback, Suzuran grabbed her own arm.

"This… I had it when I was picked up by Sekkachimaru…"

Suzuran looked up at the witch.

Standing there dumbfounded, the witch seemed to be fighting against some inner anguish.

"Ma… ma…?"

Even in her confusion, Suzuran whispered that.

The white wolf growled and glared at Homura's back.

"So you managed to talk to them, huh."

"Koma-senpai… Taga-senpai."

Kamikoma and Taga arrived, having finally caught up with Homura.

Taga, having undone his Were-Form, was carrying the unconscious Touya on his shoulder.

Both boys were wounded, but they appeared to have suffered no serious injuries.

Kamikoma warily gazed at the witch.

"…So it is just as Suzuran said," the witch murmured lowly.

For an instant, Homura's expression turned joyful, believing that the witch had finally understood.

However, she soon widened her eyes in shock as she once more sensed something strange in the exhausted witch's behavior.

"Why will thou not leave us alone…?"

The witch glared at them coldly.

"Those who has't chanced upon the Tengu Kakushi cannot obtain happiness if they returneth to their homeland."

"That's not true, Subaru-san," Homura resolutely rejected the witch's claim, adding, "'A mealy primrose's heart knows the season and waits for spring', you know."

The witch repeated Homura's words in a whisper, and then she made a frightening sneer.

Even Suzuran froze in fear with a stiffened expression at the sight of it.

"That is the traditional warning, the motto of mine family. Those words refer to the isolation of the mealy primrose hidden beneath the snow. It means to simply covet ease and idleness and not achieve anything, thereby not losing anything, or experiencing pain, or realizing that the cold is cold and the darkness is dark."

As if agreeing with her quiet anger, the wolves visibly increased their blood-thirsty hostility.

Both Kamikoma and Taga became even more on edge and put their hands on their respective weapons.

But Homura restrained them and resolutely continued to try persuading the witch.

"I… I know that girl's mother. I know how long she's been continually thinking of her baby."

Homura held out her hand, and Suzuran looked at her keenly and painfully before turning to look at the witch questioningly.

"Spring shalt not come. It hath already passed. If Suzuran also says that she will leave me, I will tell her that tis better to simply remain in winter—"

"Even so."

Homura squared off against the witch without looking away.

"Even so, spring will come. Spring will come. Even if winter continues for a hundred or a thousand years, spring will definitely come!"

"Why dost thou say that? Tis futile to wish for a chance that shalt never come. Tis an act of folly with no reward. So why dost thou say that?"

"It's because… I'm an idiot who doesn't know anything. But!"

Despite her awkward words, Homura's eyes remained earnest.

"She's been waiting all this time. Even if several decades pass, if she can meet her child again, her painful feelings will also be negated at that instant. If the flower blooms there—"

"Art thou saying to forget about winter?"

The witch's cold tone clearly told Homura that her words hadn't gotten through to her.

"Hime… I want to meet my mother. I want to meet my real mother."

Suzuran tried to implore to the witch, but she shuddered at the freezing aura she emitted.

"Do not casually call me Hime."

Suzuran trembled with a start.

"I am Subaru—Iotsumisumaru no Hime. Mine clan's fate is to protect and pass on the Misasagi bloodline and bonds in this land. If thou would abandon the name I bestowed to thee and leave, do not act friendly and yearningly towards me anymore."

"Hime…… I'll come back. After I meet my real mama, I'll definitely come back to you, Hime."

"I didst not need thou from start."

The witch's sleeve hems fluttered and her fingers suddenly slashed through the air.

At that instant, lightning swelled and burst forth like a whip, attacking the nearby Suzuran and Homura.

"—Stop it."

With a low yell, Taga jumped forward in front of the two girls as they fell and swung his gauntlet at the witch to push her aside, and the witch jumped back to dodge.

"This is the end for those who would disturb mine heart's balance."

The lightning attacked Suzuran even more intensely.

Homura, having barely managed to stand back up, glared angrily at the witch.

"You're mad."

The witch's finger flashed, and there was a spirit stone tied to a cord and hanging from it, which now began to shake and sway.

"Oh my…"

Seeing that and understanding what was about to happen, Kamikoma gulped.

"Phosphorous—"

Not giving anyone the time to look closely at the jewel, a fireball appeared right in front of it.

It was a gigantic fireball like none that Homura had seen before—

And peculiar metallic sounds rang through the air like an orchestra.

"Get back, Homura, Taichi! She's boosting it—"

Kamikoma yelled while trying to forcefully lift up Touya from where he had been put down on the ground.

As if intending to burn everything to ash, the fireball continued to swell and grow larger.

"—Spirit—Merciful—"

The fireball eventually became enlarged to the point where its bottom touched the ground, immediately gouging into the ground and burning away all grass and flowers in an instant.

Taga grabbed Homura's shoulder and urged her to run away.

"I can't—leave that girl behind!" Homura shouted and pointed at Suzuran who had collapsed on the ground in front of the witch.

Throwing off his gauntlets because they were in the way, Taga lifted Suzuran up into his arms, and meanwhile Homura took short yet deep breaths and prepared to use magic.

She no longer had the spirit stone that senpai had entrusted to her.

"—Geyserite."

The fireball, having reached several times the size of Taga's body, shot forth to attack them.

It burned away the air and released heat hot enough to make Homura's chest burn just by opening her mouth.

"____"

There was no longer enough time left for her to form a hexahedron-level pattern and chant the incantation.

However—

"The incantation isn't necessary—"

Senpai's words rose back up in Homura's mind.

"What's necessary is the image you imagine. The incantation is merely an aid."

Frantically holding out her hands towards the giant fireball, Homura unconsciously completed the step-by-step process that senpai had taught her by the river and simply imagined the pattern in its entirety all at once.

To give an example, it was like grasping the entire process of a seed budding and growing into a large tree and eventually decaying away as having all been part of that single seed—

Or like grasping the cycle of water evaporating from the sea and turning into clouds and rain that then poured down on the mountains and followed the rivers to return to the sea as a single cycle without impairing the details of the gathering and dispersing process—

She made and repeated that single image and that instantaneous aria countless times in her mind.

It filled the entirety of Homura's consciousness.

Faster, faster. That was all she thought of.

With a pop, a fireball appeared before her overlapped palms. It was a tiny flame[1] that couldn't even be compared to the witch's.

The next instant, the small flame multiplied infinitely in numbers and became a wall of neatly lined-up fireballs that blocked the path of the approaching threat.

Just when it seemed like the wall had stopped the giant fireball, it wrapped around it like a net and kept it stopped in place.

The witch's fireball and Homura's wall of fireballs merged together into a simple lump of flames, standing still in the air between the two of them.

Along with the positive feedback of controlling their spells, the recoil from the two spells warring against each other hit the two spell-casters right to their core.

Losing herself to her burning anger, the witch tried to overpower Homura.

But something strange happened as her lips tried to say the incantation phrase.

"Mine control of the stone… is being stolen away…"

The spirit stone visibly resonating between her fingers was glowing contrary to the witch's will and becoming incandescent.

"Wake up and… come to your senses already!"

Letting out a howling cry of anguish, Homura forcefully pushed back the fireball.

The fireball shrunk and converged to a single point, and then exploded right before the witch's eyes.

Color disappeared from the world, leaving only a primeval fire to light the area.

The fragment of true flame that ruled this blank world alighted there for just an instant, and then it became a violent, explosive blast that scattered apart and returned to its place among the world's components.

The afterimage burned into their eyes gradually faded.

The outline and details of the land near the valley castle returned.

After having prostrated on the ground while buffeted by the raging wind, Kamikoma finally stood up and spun her head this way and that in search of her comrades.

"…Haah……!"

"H-Hey… those burns of yours—!"

Regaining consciousness after having been covered and protected by Kamikoma, the girl in the blue kimono—Suzuran—crawled out from under her and desperately dashed ahead.

She headed straight for Homura, who was standing stock still while grasping one of her arms uncertainly, and the witch, who had collapsed and was lying stretched out on the ground without even twitching.

"…Really, that girl…"

Kamikoma pulled her lute, which had broken several strings, close to her and looked around, and she immediately found Taga as well.

Taga was silently kneeling down on the ground and examining Touya.

They had been blown far away in that brief explosion.

Seeing that the two boys seemed to be safe and unhurt, Kamikoma approached them, but was rendered speechless.

Taga had taken out a handkerchief from his chest pocket and was wiping Touya's face with clumsy fingers.

As Touya stirred slightly as if beginning to awaken from a terrible nightmare, Taga carefully wiped the tears flowing out from the corner of the younger boy's eyes. His face looked serious and sad as he did so—

Kamikoma timidly approached, as if she had just seen something she shouldn't have.

"Taichi."

She pulled on Taichi's sleeve with her fingers, and he raised his head in surprise.

Seeing Kamikoma's slightly pouting expression, Taga hurriedly offered his handkerchief to her.

"……"

Kamikoma just stared at him, her pouting face unchanging, so, taking the hint, Taga gently held out his palm.

Putting his palm on her head and practically hiding it beneath his hand, he scrubbed her face and the rest of her head without minding how he further ruffled her disheveled hair from the earlier blast.

"…Ah…… phew…"

Kamikoma let out a shudder and slapped her cheeks, and only then did she regain her usual dashing smile.

And then she turned to look down at Touya along with Taichi.

"I guess we all pulled through safely."

Taga nodded in agreement.

Noticing that the melody of healing was being played, the golden-haired princess tried to get up from the ground.

"…Kuh…"

Subaru, having just regained consciousness, let out a groan.

Homura was looking down at her with a complex expression, despite the fact that she had suffered severe wounds of her own on her hands.

Subaru looked up at her dazedly and murmured.

"So I wast too slow with mine Mathematica…"

"……"

As Subaru lay kneeling on the ground, Suzuran clung to her chest.

Kamikoma, Taga and Touya all watched the scene from the sidelines.

"Hime…"

Subaru gently placed a hand on Suzuran's head.

"That bracelet—"

"……"

"Though tis gone now, thither used to be a bell attached to that bracelet… Tis where I got thy name from, Suzu[2]."

Subaru's voice was gentle, having regained her reason, and her expression as the witch was completely gone now. She then turned to Homura.

"Are thou a descendent of the Misasagi clan…?"

Homura shook her head slightly.

"No. Misasagi is my senpai. I heard about that family motto from her as well."

"By senpai, thou mean that girl Suzu brought here?"

"Yes."

While lovingly caressing Suzuran's head leaning against her chest, Subaru focused her attention on the hairpin in Suzuran's hair.

Eventually, she seemed to pull herself together and spoke again.

"When the times change, even the family motto that we hath passed down without alternation shalt change as well, huh… Perhaps tis time for me to change as well."

After saying that, Subaru let out a deep sigh.

With help from Homura and Suzuran, she stood up and sat back down on a nearby chair.

Suzuran was continuing to cling to Subaru as if she was a part of her foster parent, showing concern for her and not even trying to move away.

Homura and the others anxiously exchanged looks.

With no help for it, Homura and the others reluctantly promised to visit again and left the castle for now.

—One week later.

On a clear day after a month had passed in Nutellan time.

While still hartboring some considerable nervousness, Homura and the others visited the witch's valley.

The present members were Homura, Touya and Misasagi-senpai.

The reason they were able to visit Nutella again in such a short amount of time was because they had specially borrowed the Transport Ring at Hiyoshizaka High and shortened the interval between transport opportunities by distributing the necessary magic power cost between the two schools.

"Thou art—a descendent of our clan—"

"……"

Subaru and Mayo. Both members of the Misasagi clan.

Seeing them standing there facing each other, a resemblance between them could be clearly seen.

Subaru strongly sensed that herself, not needing any words to be said to understand.

Ties of blood connected these two across different planets.

"I am Misasagi Mayo. I am the eleventh generation descendant of Misasagi Yoshizumi's younger brother, Misasagi Yoshinao."

"Then the Misasagi clan managed to revive and rebuild?"

"Yes. After the end of the Edo era, Japan was opened to the world and our family lost their position as samurai, but we have strived with each generation to never forget our family founder's lessons and dignity."

Senpai timidly held out something.

"This is the heirloom passed down in our family—a short sword left behind by Yoshizumi-dono. As his direct descendent, it rightfully belongs to you. Please accept it."

"Mine father's… memento."

Accepting the presented short sword reverently, Subaru hugged it preciously to her chest.

"It hath not rusted at all. It still looks so new…"

Tears streamed down Subaru's cheeks.

"All mine father's mementos has't decayed and rusted away with the flow of time, until all that wast left were pointless graves and the memories within me. Protecting the way of life hither that mine father loved and tracing the feelings he left behind wast the only source of peace for me, but…"

Subaru looked at senpai and then at Suzuran next to her.

"Both Suzuran and the visit by mine family's descendent make me feel unexpectedly glad to has't lived so long."

She then turned to face Homura and Touya and dignifiedly corrected her sitting posture.

"Even if I has't declined with age… tis no excuse for behaving shamefully and attacking those who bear no sin and mine own descendent. I beg thy forgiveness."

Touya still bore vivid marks all over his body from the severe injuries he had sustained in that chaotic battle. He wore an expression of clear regret, and his eyes as he gazed at Subaru's hanging head clearly showed that he had already forgiven her.

The same went for Homura.

Misasagi approached Subaru and spoke while placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Please raise your head. Though there was an unfortunate series of event, I believe that this meeting between us is a miracle of good fortune. May I ask you to watch over our activities on Nutella and for your guidance and blessing?"

Subaru gave a small but firm nod.

"I shalt assist thee to the best of mine ability. Tis mine duty as one who bears the blood of both planets. Tis also an act of filial piety towards mine father."

"Umm…"

Homura interjected.

"I-If possible, would you like to come to Earth too, Subaru-san? W-Won't you come with us?"

"…Earth… mine father's homeland, huh…"

Subaru responded with a fleeting smile at that suggestion.

Homura and the others couldn't possibly fathom Subaru's heart at that moment. Deeply nostalgic feelings were contained in that smile.

"I am grateful for thy proposal, but… I cannot go to thy world. No, tis not a matter of how I feel. The ancient blood of this planet that flows through my veins dost not allow it."

"The blood of… your mother…?"

Subaru nodded.

"Just once, mine father recounted to me in a lonely manner of how the People of Sagacity could has't returned him to Earth through the use of Mathematica—however, he didst not choose that path. He chose to remain on this planet with mine mother and mine infant self. Unfortunately, that method of return hath already been lost as well."

Clearing away her gloomy expression, Subaru turned around brightly.

"Suzu, thou are different. Have no fear."

"Hime."

Suzuran anxiously looked up at Subaru.

"…I don't want to be separated from Hime."

She lightly clung to her foster mother's kimono sleeve.

"Please understand. Thou have someone waiting for thee and a place to return to."

Subaru took the girl's fingers and gently guided them to her palm.

"I have already received plenty from thee. Too much so."

"Hime…"

Suzuran began to cry and clung to Subaru.

"And tis not an eternal farewell. You can visit anytime, as mine Suzuran again."

"No…"

"Yukiwarimaru and the others shalt also be awaiting thee."

Caught up in the mood, Homura wiped away her own tears and muttered to herself.

"Uugh… N-No way, it's like I've come to collect a child hugging her beloved babysitter."

"Hey."

Touya dug his elbow into Homura's side.

In contrast to Subaru's words, Touya and the others could imagine that this might be their final farewell.

Considering Suzuran—Ono Erika's future after returning to Earth and the different flow of time between the two worlds… the chance was small, but that didn't mean that the possibility of their reunion was absolutely zero.

"I heard that the castle thou all used as thy headquarters here wast terribly destroyed by Suzuran playing around with fire."

"I-I don't think it can be brushed off as just playing with fire, though."

"Mine raising of her wast insufficient. It shalt probably cause problems for her true mother as well. My, my…"

Saying that, Subaru patted Suzuran's head as she continued to cling and press her face against her foster mother's chest. Subaru let out tearful laughter.

"How about it? Why not move thy—what was it again?—base camp to this castle? It would be more convenient that way. Tis not much as recompense, though."

"!"

Homura's eyes widened.

"……You're serious?"

"Thou can spend time to gradually rebuild the castle over there while basing thyselves here."

"How wonderful! That would be great! That way you won't have to be lonely either, Subaru-san, and we can inform you on how Suzuran-chan is doing as well."

"I can also bring you some new Rakugo stories as well," Touya added.

"That would be delightful."

"Wow, how nice… Huh, but what about the Transport Ring's restrictions…?"

"I also think it's not a bad idea, but I don't know how we'd accomplish it, practically speaking," Touya mused. "Is there a way to change the transport location?"

Senpai crossed her arms and considered Touya's question.

"Readjusting the Transport Ring might require recalculating everything and rebuilding it from scratch, but… I don't think it's impossible."

For the sake of Suzuran's mother who was waiting for her daughter's return, Homura and the others didn't waste any more time at the castle and departed.

Suzuran was still forlorn as she accompanied Homura and the others, and when she turned to look back at her accustomed home, Subaru-hime was standing at the base of the castle, seeing Suzuran off with a small wave of her hand.

The wolves were gathered next to her and were clearly restless, seeming ready to chase after Suzuran at any moment, but the giant white wolf, Yukiwarimaru, firmly held them back.

Both the castle and Suzuran's foster family grew distant, and when she could no longer see them anymore, a single wolf's howl heartrendingly echoed through the valley.

Chapter 23 END

1 Here, the word for "flame" is pronounced the same way as her name: "Homura".

2 In Japanese, "Suzu" means "bell". On a side note, her full name "Suzuran" means "lily of the valley", a flower which notably looks like a bell as well.

Chapter 24

On a certain day off from school.

"To think my next date would be at a hospital… You really have strange tastes…"

Homura grumbled sourly.

Her reproachful glare was focused solely on Touya, who was buying some juice at a vending machine in the hospital hallway.

"You want bread, then? The shop is over that way."

"That's no different from our lunches at school. Isn't there a dining hall around here?"

"I don't know that much. Also, I've never heard of any hospital food being tasty."

"You call me here out of nowhere and yet you lack any plan whatsoever?"

"I never said this was a date."

"Hoh, then what is it? What is it, huh? Huh?"

"You're too loud. Keep it down, okay?"

Touya glared at her while tossing her a café au lait from the vending machine. While plainly disapproving of being hushed with such a meager bribe, Homura still accepted the goods.

"…Why are we sneaking around here?"

"Because we're not here today, officially speaking…"

"?"

Still unable to grasp the situation, Homura disappointedly brought the straw to her mouth.

The weather was on the decline today, so the older sister Homura had forced her begrudging younger sister Tsuyu to accompany her shopping. Just when they had arrived at the shopping center in Honmachi, she got a call from Touya.

"Just come here right away, all right?"

After being told just that, Homura had reluctantly changed bus routes to come here. She forced the shopping onto Tsuyu, and she also added in some troublesome and easily misunderstood products to the shopping list for her to get while she was at it.

"Ah, crap."

"What?"

Touya ducked back his head after peeking over to the hospital's service entrance.

Homura and Touya, a pair of high school students, were now lurking behind the vending machine in order to desperately hide from a jeans-wearing woman who had entered the hospital.

"—Mori-chan?"

"So the leaked information I got was correct."

It was Professor Fujimori, and beside her was a man wearing chino pants and suspenders.

"So… we came here to catch our teacher's act of impropriety?"

"What? Look closely at who's beside her."

"Oh, if it isn't Tanakura-sensei from Hiyoshizaka High. He's not wearing a white lab coat today. What, so they're the ones on a date, then?"

"Like I said, this isn't a date."

"Is this hospital connected to Tanakura-sensei?"

"I wonder. I don't think so, anyway. This place is a branch of the police hospital."

"Police hospital? …Really? It looks just like a normal general hospital, though…"

She looked around the waiting room, but there were no signs of any heavily injured police officers, patients in striped prison uniforms or Yakuza bosses followed by bodyguards like she imagined would be in such a place.

"…It's true that it looks like a normal hospital at first glance. This is my first time coming here too."

The two teachers were leaning against a pillar in the lobby without talking much, seeming to be waiting for someone.

Out of the two of them, Fujimori was the one who was acting uncomfortable and bored. She kept looking at her watch and trying to use her cell phone only to be reprimanded by Tanakura.

"…What's with that behavior?"

"Mori-chan is just like a penguin at the zoo."

"Touya-kun, you say really cruel things sometimes."

While engaging in such whispered conversation, Homura voiced a subject that suddenly occurred to her.

"Touya-kun, you didn't come to the Boxed Lunch contest back during the festival."

"There you go off on abrupt tangents again."

Touya looked at her in astounded exasperation.

"…I admit that I did wrong there. Actually, I already apologized for this, didn't I?"

"But if you had been there to vote for me, I would probably have gotten a complete and overwhelming victory."

"Are you holding a grudge against me for that? Just tying for first place is already a victory, isn't it?"

"…That's true, but…"

Homura sipped at her café au lait with an increasingly displeased expression.

"You still haven't told me the reason why you didn't come."

"I was busy with a family matter. I couldn't talk about it."

"You're g-l-o-s-s-i-n-g o-v-e-r the question, aren't you?"

"Shut up, you idiot with variety shows for brains. I was called to meet my mother."

"Eh… Your mother who doesn't live with you?"

"Well, she didn't come in the end, though. It happens a lot."

"…You were stood up…? Even though she was the one to call you over? …That must have been a letdown."

"Don't worry about it. She's just an irresponsible person."

"……"

Touya shrugged.

"I would have been able to win first place in my competition too if the pool water had been just five inches deeper…"

"Gah!"

"Wah!"

Ameno had appeared behind them at some point without them noticing.

She was peering at the two teachers while mimicking Homura and Touya's sneaking posture.

"…Ame-chan!?"

"Chiayu-san is really cruel. She left me all alone in the car. This is abuse of a minor, you know?"

"So you left the car without permission?"

"Ehehe. Good day to you, Takumi-san, Homura-san. I did come out without permission, but don't worry, I'm remote monitoring the area through the car's on-board camera just as I was told to."

"You mean you're monitoring the parking lot?"

"Yes."

Ameno was dressed in plain clothes today as well. It would be problematic to wear a school uniform here, after all.

Her outfit consisted of trousers she had probably gotten off Mori-chan, a hunting cap lowered over her eyes, and even a pair of colored sunglasses… It actually seemed to make her more conspicuous.

Inwardly, Homura resolved herself to help coordinate Ameno's normal clothes outside her uniform and cosplay outfits.

"I see. It would get troublesome if the mass media got wind of this, so you're keeping watch. We'll also have to try not to attract attention."

"…The mass media… Then, to follow the phrase 'hide a tree within a forest', we should pretend to be patients. All right, as someone who has never had her feigned illness "The Guilty" seen through by anyone, you can leave this to me—"

"Hinooka, don't do anything."

"Shall I stop my heart, then?"

"I'm saying we don't need to pretend to be patients."

"Yahahaha—Ah."

Suddenly, Ameno's gaze turned distant.

"It seems—they've arrived in the parking lot…"

The three Exploration Club members exchanged looks.

They went up the stairs and moved to a location where the atrium's entrance hall could be seen from.

Running while bent forward, Ameno rolled along the floor between couches and pressed her back against a low wall facing the atrium.

"Hmm. Clear."

"We're in a hospital, you know."

"Those guys—the members of the agency don't care about such things."

"Agency… Ah, you mean the paparazzi," said Homura with a wry smile.

While having that whispered conversation, the three of them slowly and quietly moved with their backs against the wall.

Eventually, the people they were waiting for entered normally through the front entrance.

The group that appeared at the entrance was two men in business suits and a woman.

"Hmm, that man there looks familiar… Is he Mori-chan's patron…?"

"That's my dad."

"Oops… Speaking of which, I saw him in that photo at your house…"

"The other man is likely the local police director of the criminal investigations department…"

"So he's also a cop?"

"Probably," said Touya with a nod.

On the other hand, the woman accompanying the two policemen was someone that Homura vividly remembered.

It was the mother of the wolf girl Suzuran.

"……"

She looked healthy and vigorous compared to the last time Homura had seen her. Unlike the two police who seemed nervous and fidgety, she looked extremely calm in comparison. She was conscientiously closing her umbrella as she entered.

The three adults met up with Fujimori and Tanakura, and then they all headed to the elevator.

Homura and the others stealthily followed after them.

They proceeded to a waiting room beside a nurse station. It wasn't a closed-off room like a conference room, but rather a shared and open space with a clear and unobstructed view through its windows. It was convenient for Homura and the others, as they could secretly peer in to watch what was going on. They might have chosen the location out of consideration in order to make the participants less tense.

Unfortunately, the weather outside was filled with clouds and rain.

"……"

Homura looked at the window while thinking it a shame, since clear weather would have been perfect for this commemorative day of reunion.

After several minutes of holding their breath, she arrived.

She was wearing clothing appropriate for a child and her hair was neatly combed, giving off a very docile impression compared to when she was on Nutella.

But she seemed healthy and in good spirits.

"…Thank goodness…"

"Ah, there's senpai."

Senpai was also there, accompanying Suzuran.

Senpai was dressed in traditional Japanese clothing. She seemed very used to wearing them, and the outfit suited her quite well.

Perhaps surprised at the number of people present in the waiting room, Suzuran was anxiously clinging to senpai's waist.

Homura and Touya were startled by how identical that scene was to that of Subaru-hime and Suzuran nestled together back at the castle on Nutella.

They knew that Misasagi-senpai had frequently visited Suzuran recently.

That was due to Fujimori's judgment and senpai's own wish.

Even on the way back to the base camp, Suzuran had been very much attached to senpai, so much so that she kept Homura at a distance as a meddling intruder.

However, during the past few days since their return to Earth, Suzuran had experienced unknown effects from the transport and weakened to the point where she couldn't even walk, worrying all the club members. Thankfully, though, there was no threat to her life, and with senpai's nursing she had soon regained health.

Homura and Touya hadn't been informed of where Suzuran was being cared for and had only learned of this second-hand through senpai's reports.

"Uugh…"

"Homura-san, the color of your face is #AA8877… Are you all right?"

"Guh… M-My stomach hurts…"

"Ouch, I'm the one in pain here. Hinooka, stop digging your nails into my shoulder."

Despite the fact that Homura herself had made that confident declaration in front of Subaru, now that she was actually witnessing the reunion between parent and child, she felt incredibly uneasy.

Her baby had been missing for three years. And now, when the mother was finally able to reunite with her daughter face to face, her girl had grown up to be over ten years old. Just what was that woman feeling after being thrust into these circumstances?

As Homura watched while gnashing her teeth, the woman finally stooped down quietly and spoke to Suzuran.

"You've grown a lot, Eri-chan."

Her voice was gentle and clear.

"You were still small at the time, so you probably don't remember your Mama. The long hair you had back then has also been cut, I see."

"……"

"Is it all right if I touch you?"

Suzuran timidly nodded.

The girl separated herself from senpai, and the woman wrapped her arms around her shoulders and gently hugged her.

Homura and the others couldn't see Suzuran's expression, but she seemed to be in a dumbfounded daze.

"……"

"You're called Suzuran now?"

"…Ah… yes. Hime gave me that name."

"That's the person who acted as your mother on Nutella, right? Someday, I have to meet that princess and tell her thank you. Thank you for protecting Erika-chan."

"…N-Not now. If you're going to do meet her, it has to be on a clear day. She's even more easily angered on days when the fog is thick.

"Is that so? Then on a clear day it is."

Slipping out a giggle, the woman separated herself a bit and fully looked over her grown-up daughter.

"Please let me properly look at your face…"

The woman touched her fingers lovingly to Suzuran's cheek as she looked at her.

"How strange… You were so small not long ago, and yet…"

Seemingly ticklish, the girl twisted her body to escape the fingers.

The other people in the room silently watched from a distance as the two tried to re-forge their hazy bond as parent and child. The elderly police assistant inspector, who had participated in the search for the girl, had been wiping his eyes with a handkerchief since the moment the mother and daughter had come face to face.

Putting both hands on her daughter's shoulder, the woman spoke again.

"If you prefer it, I can call you Suzuran too."

"……"

The girl awkwardly averted her eyes and sent a lost and uncertain glance at senpai standing nearby, but then she returned her upturned gaze to the woman and spoke.

"It… It's fine, you can call me Erika."

"Really?"

"In exchange… C-Can I call you Mama?"

The woman nodded happily.

"…Mama…"

"Yes."

Warm tears once more appeared in the eyes of the woman who had long since quit crying—

"Mama… Mama, Mama, Mama!"

The girl's choked cries began to gush out.

While tightly hugging her clinging daughter, the mother kept nodding over and over.

As their heart-aching voices resounded through the waiting room, Homura suddenly stood up.

"This is enough. I'm going home first, all right?"

"—Hinooka? Hey."

Homura abruptly left and headed towards the stairs attached to the side entrance.

Touya stood up to chase after her, but his sleeve was tugged back.

When he turned around, Ameno winked at him while waving her finger.

"What's wrong, Misasagi?"

"No, it's nothing."

After being spoken to, senpai turned her gaze to Fujimori.

"It's better if you don't stare at that hallway over there too much. No need to stir up unnecessary trouble."

"…True."

Senpai smiled.

"But, another time."

"Yeah. It'd be nice if it happens."

After taking time to breathe, the woman came forward to senpai, Fujimori and Tanakura and bowed her head deeply.

With the girl in the middle of them, the group exchanged congratulations and words of gratitude respectively.

"Fuu… guh… *sniffle*…"

Every time she descended a step on the stairs, tears dripped down at Homura's feet one by one.

When she managed to restrain her tears, this time she leaked out a strange voice.

But she was happy, so happy.

Homura stopped on one of the stairs' landings—

And then she covered her face with both hands and let herself cry her eyes out.

She was probably making a terrible face that would be quite a sight for anyone to see.

But she didn't particularly care if she had cried back there.

She truly didn't care if Touya and Ameno saw her like this.

She would have even jumped into the room and surprised Suzuran and the others without caring about the circumstances.

It was just that she'd had trouble breathing from shock and felt choked.

She felt bewildered and overwhelmed at the fact that from within a person like her, who always tried to embellish her emotions while peeking at the reactions of the people who saw her, such frank and honest feelings could overflow, and that these feelings were a prayer of happiness.

It'll be all right. She'll surely be able to share her feelings next time, with her friends and comrades.

Chapter 24 END

Epilogue

"Kujou-san, Kujou-san."

It was right when school ended for the day.

In the entranceway where the scent of grass drifted strongly in the summer heat, a girl threw her indoor shoes into the shoe rack and hurriedly chased after someone.

"Want to go home together?"

"No."

"Come on. Don't. Say. That~"

The girl called out while jumping down the front steps, but the other person didn't stop.

Kujou was brusque and unsociable as usual.

"You're going to do another live performance, right? I heard from Koma-senpai."

"…It's not a live performance, it's just a classic music concert. You would find it boring, Hinooka-san."

"Can I go watch? If it's a formal concert, then even a high schooler like me can go."

"Do as you like."

Homura shrugged her shoulders at the completely unapproachable Kujou.

Muscular boys from the Wrestling Club were returning from their run.

With the district tournament approaching, the club members were earnest in their training.

As the boys sneaked glances at the two girls, Homura waved her hand and smiled pleasantly. She slapped her nonexistent biceps and went as far as to show them a fight pose in support.

The club members cheered loudly.

When Homura turned back around, Kujou was looking at her in disbelief.

Acting nonchalant while actually feeling a little nervous, Homura spoke up to her.

"Hey, Kujou-san, can't we become friends?"

"We are friends. We're classmates."

Kujou-san replied at once, and then she walked off without another word.

Homura, while enduring the deep cut she'd been dealt, still chased after Kujou.

"B-But, the two of us being in the same class isn't something that either of us decided on. That's just coincidence."

"…Is there some problem with that?"

"How about doing things with me like eating boxed lunches together, eating cake at a café after school or conquering the Anmitsu[1] shop where you have to stand in a long line to order on weekends?"

"Those are all food-related."

"Oh, you're right. Then what else would be good to do? Anything's fine, except for each of us going home separately."

"……"

Underneath a neatly pruned pine tree, Kujou came to a stop and turned to face Homura again.

"I'll say this now."

"All right, I'll listen well."

"Being with someone like me is boring, and I have absolutely no intention to try and entertain you either."

"Yeah, I figured."

"…!"

Homura had managed to land a counter slash.

"Close pals you always get along with are really boring. They're like family and make you feel relieved. But that's all. Being with them makes you feel completely safe and secure, but there's absolutely zero adventure there. If a close pal can understand what I'm thinking and feeling like their own mind and vice versa, then I don't need any. I want friends."

"……"

"Kujou-san, you're strict towards both yourself and others. That's surely why you set the bar so awfully high for someone to become a friend you can acknowledge: you want to avoid any failures or mistakes for the duration of your relationship. But isn't that just an extreme case of playing at being friends?"

"You want to say it's just calculation and self-interest? But I have no intention of changing my personality."

"That goes for me too. But we'll change. If we're together, we'll both change little by little."

Saying that, Homura walked ahead of Kujou this time and headed towards the school gates.

Perhaps the way she roughly shouldered her bag on her back was to hide her embarrassment.

When she fearfully looked back while continuing to walk, she saw Kujou following after her, and that made Homura smile a little shyly.

Homura turned forward again and looked up at the blue sky.

The fact that Kujou's cheeks were slightly red while no one looked might not have just been because of Homura's impolite entreaty right before she could retort.

"The truth is, Kujou-san, I only think about myself. I love myself. I'm the president of my own fan club, you know?"

"I know."

"Yeah, I figured. But if I have you as a friend, Kujou-san, I feel like I'll be able to like myself even more. No, I surely will."

Homura smiled again with a mysterious certainty.

"In that case, it's not just coincidence anymore, right? These feelings are something I searched for and found myself."

"……"

Kujou remained silent.

Even so, she was keeping pace with Homura as they walked.

"We were in the same class for all three years of middle school, right? After such a long series of coincidences, I think it's very probable that we'll be in the same class for all three years of high school as well."

"That's a conclusion that completely overturns probability theory from its very premise, you know?"

"That's why I think it would be best if we became friends."

"Kuh… What's with that logic?"

Kujou voiced her objection without thinking.

Homura also burst out laughing at the queerness of what she herself was saying.

"Haah."

After letting out a small sigh, Kujou murmured.

"—No sweets."

"You dislike sweets?"

"…They make me gain weight."

"So you actually like them, then? Fufu."

Homura smiled proudly for some odd reason as she peered at Kujou.

The Brass Band Club's playing resounded through the schoolyard, out of tune as always.
Along the summer road were the endless blue sky above, and two dazzling napes—
End of Volume 1

1 Anmitsu: a popular Japanese desert made of small cubes of agar jelly, sweet azuki bean paste, a variety of fruits, and boiled peas.

Afterword,
by Hoshizora Meteo

How did you like “Fire Girl”?

If you were able to escape from the hectic hours and gloominess of everyday life for even a short time and enjoy this adventure on an unknown planet as the protagonist Hinooka Homura’s fellow traveller while turning these pages, then I’m thankful.

Umm, I think there are some readers familiar with me, but as formality, I’ll introduce myself.

I, the incompetent Hoshizora Meteo, am a writer and game planner who works for the Notes-brand company TYPE-MOON. I do things like writing scenarios for anime productions and helping with game text. This is my first light novel which I wrote in between doing such jobs.

Since this is the first afterword of this series, I’ll start with thanks and apologies—(Rather, I don’t have anything else to write about here.)

First, BUNBUN-san, who was put in charge of character designs and illustrations.

The vague images of the characters that I had while I wrote were abruptly given life and substance thanks to BUNBUN-san’s diverse and attractive designs. When I re-read the story for myself while imagining the faces of the Exploration Club members, I really felt their presence and passion, as if I had mysteriously discovered them all over again, and it made me want to play in this world more.

Rounin-san, who was put in charge of background illustrations and artistic settings.

I sighed in admiration at his brush strokes, which truly conveyed the magnificent atmosphere of Nutella, and his artistic sense, which weaved together factors that mixed illusion and reality.

No words can properly convey the gratitude I feel for these two illustrators, who struggled hard to go beyond the bounds of their normal work amidst their harsh and busy schedules. Thank you both so much.

I also owe deep gratitude to my boss Takeuchi Takashi-san, who zealously took charge of the coordinated producing and visual editing of this work.

There are others who greatly helped me as well. This experience really made me come to admire the many and varied people who are all part of making and publishing just a single volume of a novel.

I am also grateful to my friends who gave me advice while writing—

K-san, who told me about true stories from a genuine Exploration Club. I still don’t have anywhere near enough resolve and diligence to directly face you, and you’re probably quite displeased. Sorry, but I think I’ll always be like this.

The manga author Nakamura Tetsuya-san, who taught me about interesting stories of the Wandervogel movement[1]. If it seems like Homura’s stupidity-level increased, that might be Nakamura-san’s fault?

The manga author Koume Keito-san, who I ended up consulting with about certain details. If the number of fans of Koma-senpai increased, it’s thanks to Koume-san.

Lastly, Nasu Kinoko-san, who gave me his impressions of this volume’s first manuscript. I received important pointers from him that caused me to add an entire chapter to the manuscript afterwards. When I look back, this was an indispensable component for this volume.

Thank you so much, all of you.

By the way, it seems that this series is planned to encompass three volume arcs. A total of six books. Seriously?

If luck is on my side and the next volume is published, this time I want to explore not just Nutella, but the Earth-side world of the Exploration Club as well.

Those who are interested in the continuation of the adventures of Hinooka Homura and her comrades, thank you and please continue to support this series.

1 Wandervogel: A back-to-nature youth movement that originated at the end of the nineteenth century in Germany and later spread to Japan. It focuses on outdoor activities such as mountaineering and youth independence.